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LADY JUDAS.

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Aunt Reid

LADY JUDAS

LADY JUDAS

A DRAMA IN A PROLOGUE AND THREE ACTS

BY

FRANK BARRETT

AUTHOR OF

"A PRODIGAL'S PROGRESS," "FETTERED FOR LIFE," "THE WOMAN OF THE IRON BRACELETS," "UNDER A STRANGE MASK," ETC.

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LADY JUDAS

THE PROLOGUE—SCENE I

With his hands at his back and a cigar in the corner of his mouth, Mr. Dudley St. John sauntered through the rooms of Charlton Place—"that very eligible gentleman's residence situated on the Downs within easy distance of Brighton to let furnished for the season at twenty guineas a week." By an occasional nod he expressed languid interest in the many advantages pointed out to him by the accompanying caretaker. The sauntering pace facilitated exhaustive observation; the half-closed lids masked the searching glance that overlooked nothing and picked up many a valuable trifle unconsidered by the caretaker. The house was packed with valuable stuff; but beyond a few miniatures, which might fetch a decent price in America, and some knick-knacks that the Amsterdam dealers would take at a reasonable price, there was nothing to tempt Mr. Dudley St. John. The best things were all too cumbrous for his purpose, which was simply robbery.

For this man was a robber, not of the clumsy, old-fashioned villainous type, but of quite the latest development and up-to-date pattern. He carried no bludgeon up a fustian sleeve, but a case of high-class Havannas in the pocket of a coat which was a credit to the Bond Street tailor who made it. Dudley St. John was his actual name, and no pretentious alias, and he —to his greater shame—was a gentleman by birth and education. Lust for luxury and an invincible repugnance to the means of getting what he wanted honestly, had brought him by uneasy stages to this last desperate expedient.

"I must see the plate," he said, glancing at the newspaper cutting drawn from his ticket-pocket; "but, of course, that's at the bankers?"

"No, sir; it's in the store closet here," replied the caretaker, briskly turning to a closed door which had excited St. John's curiosity and prompted the inquiry; "but master has the keys, naturally."

Beyond the ordinary lock which any child might pick with a skewer there was a brand-new padlock on the door—a patent affair not to be picked by any contrivance. St. John knew the thing, and knew also of a tool in the cyclists' shop which would crush it up like a matchbox with three turns of a screw. He turned on his heel with that exasperating nod of indifference and strolled to the window. Good, old-fashioned shutters! St. John would have undertaken to open them from the outside with a centre-bit blind-

folded. Nice old sash catch! that would yield sweetly to the pressure of a thin driver. Height of window from the ground outside, three foot six. The job was one of the most pleasing simplicity.

"I will look round the garden," said he.

The caretaker bustled down a passage and opened a door.

"Who lives there?" asked St. John, indicating the detached house standing beyond the garden wall.

"Well, sir, that's a ladies' suminary," said the caretaker apprehensively.

"A school?"

"Yes, sir; but it's vocation now."

"Holidays—that's why there's no row?"

"Yes, sir; but when the young ladies are all there you can scarcely notice them, they're so high-class. Some people I know has objections, but master finds 'em no determent; says the sound of their young voices is better than all the nightingales and blackbirds—which we don't get here."

"You can shut up the house while I look round," said St. John, putting half a sovereign into the caretaker's ready hand.

"Thank you, sir, very much. If you'd like to pick a few flowers for your buttonhole——"

St. John turned on his heel and strolled down the path, his eye everywhere, head unturned, measuring the practicable approaches to the window of the room with the store closet in it. If the plate were in

anything like relative proportion with the appointments of the house the bag must be good. And the bagging presented no difficulties. The caretaker lived away from the house in rooms over the coach-house, and the proximity of the school was not to be feared—thanks to "vocation." Had the house been full of hysterical girls, all ready to scream at the sound of a mouse stirring, there would have been danger possibly. He paused beyond a bank of rhododendrons to survey the whole theatre of operation comprehensively.

A momentary flash of colour—pink cheeks and brown hair—caught his eye as a girl bobbed down behind the garden wall between a lilac and a laburnum.

Dudley St. John waited without moving a muscle for the head to reappear, as it certainly must if he were not altogether out in his estimate of feminine curiosity. Two, three minutes passed, and then a fringe of nut-brown hair shone in the sunlight, after that a rim of white forehead and a pair of dark eyebrows rose into sight, followed by two bright eyes, and the moment they fell upon Dudley St. John he was advancing with a gesture that made retraction impossible.

"As we are to be neighbours very shortly," said he in a tone of easy assurance, "I may as well introduce myself at once."

"I—I am only a pupil," replied the frightened girl, pink and white by turns with the embarrassment of her position, and only just sufficiently self-possessed

to overcome the impulse to bob down again and take to her heels.

"Only a pupil," echoed St. John, raising his eyebrows; "I thought yours was an ordinary girls' school."

"And now you think it must be a home for incurables, a penitentiary, or a house of detention," the girl flashed, anger taking the place of embarrassment—"seeing me here—a girl of eighteen, when every one else is making holiday. And so it *is* a house of detention so far as I am concerned. Isn't it a shame?"

"I can't think so."

"But all the rest have gone away," the sense of wrong being uppermost, "girls, teachers, and all the Misses Pridmore—save one who stays as a sort of sheep-dog to keep watch over me, and she doesn't like it, and snaps and snarls accordingly."

"She may hear you if you speak so loudly."

"I don't care," said the girl.

"But I do."

"Why?"

"Because the sheep-dog may regard me as a kind of wolf and pen you up in a corner where I may never again find means of seeing you."

"Do you want to see me again?" she asked, dropping her voice.

"I assure you I found no inducement to take this place till I saw you. Tell me to take it, and the thing

shall be done this afternoon. Not for myself, of course," he pursued, perceiving the conflict of perplexity and pleasure in the pretty eyes that twinkled down at him —"what could a single fellow do with a house of twenty rooms? I should take it for my sister and her youngsters, with the condition that the room having the best view of the spot where you are now standing should be reserved for my use."

"But what have I got to do with it?"

"All that a pretty girl has to do with a man's fate."

"You never saw me before to-day."

"Does Miss Pridmore allow you to read Byron?" She shook her head. "He explains the matter in a line—'Whoever loved who loved not at first sight?'"

"If you talk nonsense I shall have to go." But she lowered her voice yet more lest Miss Pridmore might come and end the nonsense prematurely.

"We will talk of less pleasant things if you prefer them. How long have you been here?'

"Four years—four years without one single break, without seeing any one but silly girls and the hateful Misses Pridmore."

"Have you no home?"

"Oh yes, a lovely home; but it's in Ceylon."

"Don't you wish to go there?"

"I'd go anywhere to get away from this horrid place."

That passionate declaration sank into Dudley St. John's mind and took root there, and threw out a growth of ideas which were to bear fruit with prodigious celerity.

"I never read 'The Starling,'—you know—'I can't get out, I can't get out,' without comparing its lot with mine," the girl continued, her eyes filling with self-sympathy.

"Poor little soul! Well, if you're not a starling, you're a something that rhymes uncommonly well with it."

"Oh, don't, please!"

"Must stick to the disagreeable, eh? Have you no parents?"

"Oh yes, mamma is awfully nice; but she can't have me back because my stepfather is horrid, and he and the doctor say that I must stay here until I am twenty-one—three dreadful years more."

"Perhaps your father's means will not allow of any change," St. John suggested, the growth of ideas tending in the direction of pecuniary advantage.

"Oh, that's not it; he is a tea planter and a jewel merchant as well, and is ever so rich. Hush!" turning in alarm, "there's Miss Pridmore. I must go."

"Good-bye." He held up his hand; she yielded hers. "You have not given the decisive word yet—am I to take this place?" he asked, holding her hand firmly.

She nodded, flushing to the temples and making a faint attempt to withdraw her hand.

"And will you try to be here about this time to-morrow if I come?"

She nodded again. He drew her hand down to his lips and pressed it. Then she slid away to press her burning cheeks against the cool lilacs that their colour might not betray the first dear secret of her womanhood.

Vacillation, inseparable from moral weakness, had ruined Dudley St. John on the turf, at the card-table, and elsewhere. It threatened now to spoil his chances even as a clever burglar. Here on one hand was a house to be burgled; and on the other a schoolgirl to be ruined. Weighing all probabilities it looked as if the latter would prove the more profitable undertaking. A friendly dealer had that morning warned him that he was a marked man, and that he would have to be very careful in future to escape the police. The danger of the game had lost its charm, and the winnings were not commensurate with the risk—not worth the candle. The plate and gimcracks in Charlton Place might bring him at the outside a couple of hundred. Properly managed the schoolgirl might be made to yield him a decent annuity. The risk of burgling is a certain term of penal servitude; the risk of wrecking a girl's future happiness is comparatively nothing. Could you reasonably expect such a man in such circumstances to stick to burglary?

Before a week had passed he slipped a very pretty ring on to the girl's second finger; a ring which she wore every night pressed close to her heart, and in less than a month he slipped another ring on her third finger, before the Registrar at Rottingdene, duly making her Mrs. Dudley St. John.

THE PROLOGUE—SCENE II

On the day of her marriage, the little wife wrote home, telling her parents in a high spirit of independence what had happened. It was open for any one to read between the lines:—If you don't like it you may do the other thing. But there was a warmer heart-glow in her description of Dudley—of his amazing good looks, of his wondrous generosity, and other unbounded possessions, moral and material.

Before an answer to that letter could reach her she was compelled to write another of a very different character, telling how her darling Dudley, to oblige the ripe wants of a friend, had involved himself in pecuniary difficulties which compelled him to leave the Metropole at Brighton and take humble lodgings in an East Anglian village, where he reluctantly permitted her to ask mamma to send a remittance to meet the absolute necessities of their unfortunate position. Mr. Magister at once smelt a rat. The abounding confidence, admirable in a Merchant of Venice, looks suspicious in a *fin-de-siècle* gentleman of London. A London agent was employed to look into the matter, with the result that Mr. Magister offered his step-

daughter a free passage to Ceylon and forgiveness, on condition that she separated from her husband, whose true character should be revealed to her. This proposal Mrs. Dudley St. John indignantly refused to entertain—her husband foreseeing that the game, though doubtful, might yet turn to his advantage. Patience and cautious play might yet win the odd trick.

But meanwhile, pressing requirement of hard cash had to be met. Charlton Place was still unoccupied, and the plate in the accessible store-closet tempted him. He made a bold attempt to get it, was caught in the act, brought to trial, and sentenced to seven months' hard labour.

He came out of gaol with a very small sum of ready money in his pocket. A modest lunch at Frascati's, with a small Roederer and half a dozen decent cigars, and his railway fare to the East Coast, left him with something under half a crown in the evening. But he knew that his wife was still living there, and felt pretty confident of getting something or other out of her. So he proceeded to hunt her up—that is the proper term for it—with a light heart.

The door of the cottage where he had lived with her for a few days before his misadventure was fastened. Whilst he was wrenching at the handle impatiently, a woman with a shrieking baby in her arms came into the forecourt of the adjoining cottage, and bawled out, to be heard above the yelling of the infant: "There

ain't no one at home;" then recognizing Dudley in the half light, "Oh, it's you, sir; she didn't expect you back for another week."

Exemplary conduct had obtained for Dudley a slight remission of his sentence.

"Where is she, then?" he shouted.

"Up at Rawton Hall. There, there, my puppet, don't e' cry. What do you think of it, sir?" she asked, dancing the yelling baby, and beaming on Dudley.

"I think it's a noisy little beast, if you ask me," he replied.

"Oh, don't you say that, sir, for it's your very own!"

"Worse luck!" growled Dudley, chewing the end of his cigar savagely. And truer augury he never made for all concerned in the existence of that child.

"And a hard time Mrs. Sinjins has had with it, and stoutly she's stood through it too——"

"When is she coming back?" Dudley was feeling peckish again.

"Oh, I don't know when! Suttingly not to-night. You see, sir, Lady Rawton's awful bad; and wanting a nuss, Dr. Sturgess, who has been wonderful kind to poor Mrs. Sinjins, engaged me to take care of your dear little baby while she went up to the hall, and many a pound it may put in her pocket, poor dear—oh," referring now to the yelling brat, "it have got a temper, sir, for I know it can't be on'y wind," she

said, trying to still the child's screaming by thumps on the back which would have provoked an angel.

But Dudley waited to hear no more. The prospect of finding "many a pound" in his wife's pocket had decided him to seek her at once at Rawton Hall.

The hall lies a mile distant from the village. It was dark when Dudley reached the park entrance; there was a light in the lodge. The gate stood open. With a burglar's instinct rather than from any necessity, St. John passed the lodge on tiptoe. The same instinct led him to approach the house circumspectly. A buggy was pacing the drive before the Hall. It looked like a country doctor's turnout. Probably Dr. Sturgess was in there doctoring Lady Rawton. Dudley had no wish to make acquaintance with any one who took a friendly interest in his wife's welfare. The demand to see his wife at this time might be met with an imperative refusal on the part of the doctor to let her leave his patient even for a few minutes. So Dudley kept clear of the front door, and, making a wide detour, worked round to the back of the house. Here there were many lights in the upper windows—the patient lying there possibly that the sound of the wheels on the drive might not disturb her repose. A fresh light appeared in one of the windows on the first floor whilst Dudley was scanning the façade. A young woman came to the window to draw the blind. Dudley fancied he recognized her figure in silhouette; but when she turned as if to speak over her shoulder the

light fell upon her face, and he knew she was his wife. That might be her room. Had this kind doctor sent her to take half an hour's rest before her night vigil while he was with the patient? Likely enough. There would be no harm in proving the fact and very little difficulty. For in working round Dudley had passed some outbuildings and noticed a handy ladder which would just about reach the window.

He fetched the ladder and set it noiselessly against the ivy-covered wall. As silently he mounted by it to the window. It was a Tudor house. These back windows had leaded sashes with leafed casements opening out, secured on the inside, one by a bolt, the other by a drop catch—the simplest thing to open ever offered to a burglar. Dudley carried a strong serviceable clasp knife in his pocket with a long narrow blade. Slipping the blade between the bars he lifted the latch and drew the glazed leaf back as easily as it might have been done from the inside.

Then he bent down and, raising the blind a few inches, peeped into the room. He could see no one, but on the bed lay the very hat and jacket Madge wore when she ran away from school with him—the day they were married. It was his wife's room beyond a reasonable doubt, and she must come into it sooner or later. Why should he not get in and wait for her there? Safer than standing outside, and far more comfortable. In a big house like this there are always a lot of trifles lying about which are worth picking

up. If any other than his wife came in he had only to say who he was, and there would be scarcely any inquiry as to how he had come there—ordinary routine of the household being upset by Lady Rawton's illness. He crawled through the window, closed the casement behind him, and setting his hat on the table, seated himself in an easy-chair, crossed his legs, and looked about him with those furtive comprehensive eyes. His composure was so absolute that any one coming in might have concluded that he had been waiting there an hour.

"Oh, that's what's the matter, eh!" said he to himself, catching a faint cry behind the door, "more babies."

The door opened and his wife entered the room, carrying in her arms the whimpering child wrapped in a thick, soft blanket. She saw her husband sitting there; and his raised fore-finger and lowered brows suppressed the cry which was on her lips. Hurriedly she laid the baby upon the bed, and then, turning, threw herself wildly into Dudley's arms, he having risen from the chair. She kissed the villain passionately.

Dudley didn't mind this sort of thing in its proper time and place—rather liked it, in fact—but it irritated him now, being altogether out of harmony with the serious business which had brought him there.

"I want money," he whispered—his first words; "beastly hard up."

"Money, darling; I have none—not enough for your wants."

"You're not doing this job for nothing, are you?"

"No; I am to be well paid, and when I get the money you shall have it all—all!"

"I can't wait; I must have it now."

She bethought her of something saved for her baby at home, and quickly bringing it from her pocket she put it in his hand.

"It will do to go on with, darling," she said.

He opened the purse and turned over the coins inside.

"What on earth is the good of this to me—a few beggarly shillings?"

Madge dropped her face in her hands and began to cry. Nothing maddened him more than crying.

"Don't be a fool! Dry up!" he growled, shaking her rudely by the shoulder. He checked himself suddenly, and whispered, "What's that?"

His quick ear, ever on the alert, had caught the distant crunch of wheels on the gravelled drive, the whispering of servants in the passage, the hurrying patter of feet descending stairs, and now came a man's authoritative voice calling "Nurse!" within a few yards.

The little wife dashed the tears from her eyes, turned to the door in an instant, raising her finger—an unnecessary caution—and slipped into the corridor, drawing the door to behind her to screen her husband

from the eyes of Dr. Sturgess, who stood at the door of the adjoining room.

"Rawton has come!" (from the Embassy at St. Petersburg, where he had received a telegram telling of his wife's premature confinement and serious condition). "You must go down and see him—I can't leave Lady Rawton—she is dying. You must prepare him for it—as only a woman can," said the doctor.

"But the baby," urged Madge.

"That's all right. If it cries I will go in and see to it. Run down sharp. He is on the stairs. Keep him away for a few minutes."

She obeyed.

Dudley saw the advisability of instant flight; but the prospect of leaving the house with only a few shillings deterred him. He glanced round the room—not a thing there worth taking, as he had already assured himself. But there was a door leading into another chamber. He opened it; it seemed to be a boudoir. The light from the open door fell upon a dressing-table, on which stood an ornamental box which might contain jewels. He slipped in and lifted it. It was promisingly heavy; but it was locked, and too cumbrous to take from the house. He carried it into his wife's room and set it on the table in the light of the lamp. An ornamental case of that kind must contain something valuable. He whipped out his serviceable knife and tried to force the lock. It resisted

the leverage. That was the more conclusive; the contents must be valuable to be so securely fastened. But the resistance maddened him. At that moment the child upon the bed began to cry. That spoiled the game. The doctor had promised to come if the child cried. Dudley's fury reached its climax. He turned from the box, knife in hand, and drove the blade savagely through the soft mass upon the bed.

He was sorry for it the next moment, as he drew the wet knife from the blanket—the more sorry because the blow had failed to silence the brat. It gave a yet sharper cry of pain, which he quickly stifled with his left hand as he shut the clasp-knife with his right upon his knee and dropped it in his pocket. The child writhed in the agony of suffocation. Harder and harder he pressed—for his life now depended on its silence—until the little limbs beneath the blanket ceased to move. The wee thing could cry no more.

Not a moment too soon. He heard the doctor's voice again outside the door calling "Nurse!" Plunder was forgotten now. Safety from the gallows was alone to be thought of. He stepped to the window, got out on to the ladder, and began to descend.

Raising his eyes to the window, he saw upon the white blind the red print of his own hand.

THE PROLOGUE—SCENE III

Dudley St. John had never before committed murder, and the first effect of his crime was an appalling terror.

Conscience he had none, so that had nothing to do with it. He would have taken human life with as little compunction as a sportsman shooting a bird, but for the dread of retaliating laws. It was the fear of being caught and put to the physical pain of death for the murder of Lord Rawton's child that paralyzed him. He knew there was no escape for him if caught, no possible remission of the capital punishment, Lord Rawton's position and the popular feeling for babies being considered. And that knowledge unnerved him —led him to omit the most obvious means of escape. He dared not go near the village of Rawton, dared not venture near the railway-station for fear of being apprehended while waiting for a train. Moreover, he had not sufficient money to pay his fare to London, where alone safety might be found. He walked all night in the hope of reaching Norwich before daylight, ever seeking safety by roundabout ways. He overshot Norwich. When the sun rose he found his clothes white as a miller's with the dust of the road—all save a dark red smear on his wristband. He tore off his wristband and thrust it into a rabbit hole; he went

into a copse and shook the dust out of his clothes. The craven fear growing with physical exhaustion forbade him to retrace his steps to Norwich. He felt certain for the first time that his face would betray him.

In a village away from the main road he found a dirty inn. There he ate like a wolf and drank vile liquor till his last penny was spent and he was fuddled. Then he fell asleep with his head on his arms at the greasy table like a pig, till the innkeeper woke him up and bade him turn out at closing time.

The next day, favoured by chance and desperate with hunger and necessity, he stopped a lady cycling quietly along the high-road, took her purse and watch, gashed the tyres of her machine with that serviceable knife to prevent pursuit, and got off all right. He gorged and guzzled away the rest of that day. The next morning he was stopped on the outskirts of Ipswich by a policeman in plain clothes, who said to him civilly, "You must come along with me, young fellow."

Dudley saw that his time was come, that the gallows stood now within measurable distance, and he bolted. But he was flabby, and the policeman as fresh as a four-year-old, so they were soon at close quarters. Then followed a struggle, the two rolling over and over in a cloud of dust. The policeman presently got Dudley on his back, with a knee on his chest. His right hand was well inside Dudley's collar, knuckles grinding into his windpipe; with his left he got to his whistle and blew a shrill blast. This was Dudley's

last chance, and as a forlorn hope he whipped out that serviceable knife and drove it home into his captor's side.

"Nail him, Tom! It's all over with me. Kiss the kids for me," groaned the poor fellow, falling backwards as a brother constable ran up.

Tom and others quickly nailed Dudley.

It seemed to him now but a single step to the gallows. But to his bewilderment Dudley found himself charged merely with highway robbery and the murder of a police officer. Nothing more. Not a word was said about his crime at Rawton Hall. So he had murdered a policeman merely to escape a month or two in prison for robbing that woman on the cycle. Decidedly he was an all-round failure.

He was tried at Ipswich in due course for the murder of the policeman, and sentenced to be hanged. But in consideration that the murder was not premeditated his sentence was at the last moment remitted to penal servitude for life—a miscarriage of justice in the name of humanity.

But what puzzled Dudley St. John for twenty-one years was why, hearing as he must have heard of this case, Lord Rawton had not impeached him for the previous murder of his child. Had the child by a miracle recovered? Even then the attempt at murder must be known, and being as surely traced to him would have prevented the Home Secretary doing a foolish thing.

The events of this prologue took place in 1879; the drama consequent to them began in 1900.

THE DRAMA

ACT I

SCENE I

ENTER VIVIENNE AND HERO

The child stabbed and strangled by Dudley St. John recovered, thanks to extraordinary vitality and the skilful treatment of Dr. Sturgess.

Overwhelmed with grief in the loss of his young wife, Rawton regarded his child with cold indifference, if not with absolute aversion, as the indirect cause of his loss, and, leaving the disposition of his affairs in England with Dr. Sturgess, he hurried back to St. Petersburg immediately after the funeral of Lady Rawton, to seek forgetfulness in the occupation of official duties.

Mrs. St. John, in calling Dr. Sturgess to save the life of the child, had thrown herself upon his mercy and confessed her husband's guilt. Pity responded to her appeal. He kept her secret, seeing no moral necessity to acquaint Rawton with the facts and add to his trouble. And here it may be said, to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, Lord Rawton never heard of the murderous attack made upon his little Vivienne.

In due course the doctor sent the child and her nurse to St. Petersburg, and there shortly afterwards poor Mrs. Dudley St. John died of pneumonia, aged twenty-one, and there was an end of her brief joys and sorrows. The attempted murder of Vivienne was then only known to the villain in prison and to Dr. Sturgess.

The child not only lived but grew to womanhood, with a development of exceptional vigour and intelligence. With an early perception of advantages to be won, Lady Vivienne completely subjugated her father by the profession of unbounded love and devotion and the practice of wiles that were irresistible on his part. He adored her with no misgiving, save that she was too good for this earth and might be taken from him by the jealous angels. In her twentieth year she suddenly showed symptoms of declining health which filled him with consternation. He was now seventy, and had all the illusions of that age. At a hint from Vivienne that she needed complete change—that the everlasting sameness of St. Petersburg wearied her—Rawton decided to throw up his official post and search health elsewhere for his darling. He sent in his resignation—not before it was wanted, for his intellectual faculties were growing too feeble even for her Majesty's service—and together they made the round of the gayest German baths and the most fashionable French waters. Tired of these, Lady Vivienne, fancying she would like to see Rawton Hall, suggested trying the curative powers of air as an

alternative to water. She thought the brisk East Anglian air might bring the roses back to her cheeks. Rawton jumped at this proposal with more than usual avidity—health for Vivienne with just a little rest for himself was all he craved. An agent was employed to prepare the house, and when he had done all that was necessary Lord Rawton and his daughter returned to the ancestral Hall, after an absence of twenty years and some months.

Rawton's first care after the immediate wants of his darling had been looked to, was to procure a medical attendant for her. He learnt that Dr. Sturgess was the only one to be had within a radius of seven miles. Dr. Sturgess—Rawton remembered him quite well with a pleasing astonishment at his faculty for recalling past names and circumstances—a young man very refined in manner and appearance and decidedly clever, who had done all that was possible for Lady Rawton, and been very good in looking after his affairs and taking care of Vivienne in that dreadful time—twenty-one years ago—dear, dear! twenty-one years ago! He wrote a line to the young fellow desiring him to come up to the Hall not later than eleven o'clock the next morning. And the "young fellow," now sixty years of age, though recalcitrant under peremptory treatment, came sharp to the time appointed, having a strong and perfectly natural desire to see Vivienne, and know the result of a curious experiment to which she owed her present existence.

The doctor was a remarkable man, who fell short of greatness by sheer perversity of disposition. In him genius was allied to madness in the form of incomprehensible eccentricity. A man of few faults and detesting adulation, he had no ambition, and preferred living as a country practitioner on a breezy hill in Norfolk, to the position of a London physician—which he might easily have won in Harley Street. He was content with three hundred a year in Rawton; in Harley Street he would have been discontented with three thousand.

He was bearish in manner and look—uncouth and cumbrous. Everything about him was massive—feet, hands, nose and forehead. The gentle depth of his eyes and the tenderness of his lips redeemed his face from brutality, though lightning could flash from the one and thunder roll from the other at times. He made himself cordially detested by people he disliked, and as sincerely loved by others. Perfect indifference to public opinion led him into slovenly ways. He desired to please himself in everything that was comfortable. But a cleanlier man in all things never lived. His great hands were pleasant to look at and pleasant to feel. Every thought and act of the man was wholesome. He had never shown any desire to marry, though many a pleasant woman had set her cap at him—rude as he was.

In a flannel shirt and no cravat, a tweed jacket and trousers immeasurably loose even for his big limbs, he presented himself at Rawton Hall.

"Is your master at home?" he asked of the valet who came to the door.

"What name, if you please?" asked the supercilious young man.

"Is your master at home, I asked," the words ringing out like a hammer on an anvil.

"Yes, sir," in a much humbler key; "he is in the lib'ary; but——"

Dr. Sturgess brushed past him, strode across the hall, and entered the well-known room.

Lord Rawton, with bent shoulders, his hands folded loosely at his back, was pacing the floor, agonized by the message from Vivienne saying that she was too ill to see him yet awhile; his thoughts too engaged to notice the slight sound of the opening door.

Dr. Sturgess noted the twitching of the fingers in the old man's folded hands, the pinched look of his face, and its careworn expression as he turned by the fireplace, and the vacancy in his colourless eyes when he raised his head.

"Lord Rawton?" he said, with an interrogative inflection.

"I am Lord Rawton, and—you have the advantage of me."

"I should think I had, you poor foundering old wreck," thought the doctor, silently taking stock of a hopeless case, as was his habit. Then he said—

"You sent for me. I am Dr. Sturgess."

"Pray be seated. I positively did not know you;

time works such changes. I recalled you as a delicate, somewhat spare young man." He was too courteous to refer to that refinement which also was clearly a thing of the past.

"Well, my lord, what's the matter with you?" asked the doctor, coming brusquely to the point.

"Me! nothing in the world. Never stronger in my life," Rawton replied, resting his trembling hand on the table for support as he crossed to an easy-chair; "never stronger in my life," as he seated himself with elaborate precaution; and he continued, looking at Sturgess with lustreless eyes, "My sole trouble is anxiety for my dear daughter."

"Is she ill?"

"So ill that she has sent down to say she cannot possibly see any one for half an hour."

"What's the matter with her?"

A slight flush of resentment rose in Rawton's cheek. Seldom had any one dared to speak with such brusqueness to his lordship. But consideration for his beloved child compelled resignation to the rudeness of a country practitioner.

"These documents may instruct you," he said, offering a sheaf of prescriptions, all methodically dated, docketed, and held together by a red tape, in conformity with the lifelong habit of a chief secretary.

"She eats nothing, poor child," continued Rawton, as the doctor drew out the prescriptions one after the other and read them through. "Her capricious

appetite has constantly to be tempted with delicacies. She has taken no exercise for nearly a twelvemonth, save in a carriage or invalid-chair." He enumerated the many places they had been to, the various means employed to restore her to health.

"Hum!" grunted the doctor, finishing the last document and pitching the lot higgledy-piggledy on the table.

"Well, what conclusion do you draw?" asked Rawton, anxiously.

"I profess to know very little of modern maladies or their treatment; but I know sufficient to assure you that had your daughter been afflicted with half of the diseases for which she has been treated she would have been dead in one quarter of the time covered by those prescriptions."

"Do you imply, sir, that these—these——"

"Itinerant malady mongers," suggested Dr. Sturgess, mentally.

"These eminent medical men—the best to be found in the most frequented health resorts—are actually mistaken in their diagnoses?"

"I shall be glad if you can show me a more hopeful outlook, my lord."

Vivienne's French maid, Thérèse, entered with a note, which she put in Rawton's eager hand. Whilst waiting his reply she surveyed Dr. Sturgess with unflinching effrontery; he in return looked her up and down critically, guessing who she was, and believing

that some insight to the disposition of her mistress might be got from the character of her maid. Thérèse liked being looked up and down, having a piquant face of the soubrette kind and an irreproachable figure. Taking her answer from Rawton she passed the doctor with an impudent leer from the corner of her fine eye, and the faintest approach to a smile.

"My daughter is ready to see you, Dr. Sturgess," said Rawton, glancing apprehensively at the uncouth figure. The doctor rose with a nod and followed, his hands thrust in the pockets of his voluminous trousers.

Lady Vivienne lay on a couch in the drawing-room in a loose gown of pleated black silk gauze, which fell to the undulations of her lithe form and swept the ground, leaving exposed to view a very pretty pair of feet in open-work stockings and Pompadour shoes. Her jet black hair, parted and unwaving, was drawn close over her ears and plaited at the nape of the neck, giving length to a face naturally long, narrow and thin. Her long eyes, scarcely opened with their inky lashes, looked at a distance like a slit in the white skin. One white hand, glittering with diamonds only, rested on her hip. Black and white from head to foot, unbroken by a single touch of colour save the scarlet of her lips—a very artistic production—gaining in value by the background of cream silk cushion on which she rested.

Thérèse was putting the finishing touch upon the picture. She withdrew hastily as Rawton approached

—his expression all solicitude—and brushed so closely by Dr. Sturgess, standing with wide-planted feet near the door, that her skirt whipped his legs, diverting his sombre regard from the invalid on the couch. As she turned to close the door she treated him with another leer and a more developed smile. Dr. Sturgess turned his eyes again upon Vivienne with a regard more sombre than before.

Rawton bent down and kissed Vivienne's head.

"Darling, darling, darling," she murmured, twining her arm round his neck and drawing his flaccid cheek to her lips, where she held it for some moments.

With a grunt Dr. Sturgess took a chair and carried it to the side of the couch.

Vivienne released her father with a long audible sigh, and let her hand fall gracefully again upon her hip.

"Dr. Sturgess, love," said Rawton, introducing him.

The doctor acknowledged the introduction with a nod and planted himself on the chair, to command his patient.

"You will want to sound me and all that?" she asked.

"No," he replied, taking up her hand and getting her wrist between his finger and thumb. And there he sat in silent cogitation—trying to read her body and soul. Meanwhile, an undercurrent of observation flowed through his mind. What was the smell that offended his nostrils?—some new-fangled abomination

to take the place of out-of-date sweet scents? And what had she plastered her hands and face with? (No wonder the old man kissed the top of her head.) Bismuth possibly, that would eat the fine surface away from any skin in a couple of years, as the mercury that coloured her lips would surely canker them. More corrosive oxide to paint the corners of her eyes, and darken the skin under the lashes and eyebrows—as if nature had not painted them black enough and long enough in all conscience! Was it eau de cologne that glistened in the tawny brown of her eyes. God knows what other drug the quack chemist supplied to beautify her. Beauty she certainly had for those who do not care to look beneath the surface to admire, and are not over punctilious. What would Lavater have found in those thin lips and nostrils? Greed and lust, envy, hatred, and all uncharitableness. If beauty be the symbol of perfection, then this lovely pre-Raphael monstrosity must be the perfection of evil, or he, Dr. Sturgess, as big a fool as Lavater.

But while he sat there silently reading her character she was reading his with equal perspicacity; and the provocatively amorous glance with which she first greeted him—there lay the likeness between maid and mistress—grew venomous and malignant.

At length Dr. Sturgess relinquished her hand, gently enough, and begged her rise. She rose with a contemptuous expression and a shrug, at the same time giving a little backward thrust with her hand at

the pillow behind her. The movement was not lost upon Dr. Sturgess.

"Drug or equally pernicious literature," said he to himself, "something lies under that pillow which she would not have seen by Rawton or me."

"Now will you walk to the other end of the room?"

"Is it absolutely necessary?" she asked, in a tone of languid comment.

"If my service is to be of any use to you, it is."

"C'est un farceur ce bonhomme—là," she said, taking her father's arm with an insolent assumption that the country doctor did not understand the lauguage she spoke.

She was tall, she walked gracefully, the movement of her lithe form beautiful as that of a panther.

When she turned at the end of the room, Dr. Sturgess stepped to the couch and laid his hand upon the cushion as if to lift it. In a moment she was at his side, her hand also on the cushion to hold it in its place, her eyes ablaze, lips and nostrils pinched with anger.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked between her scarcely parted teeth.

"A simple test to find how you might move without the support of your father's arm."

"And now that you are satisfied on that point you have no further need to concern yourself with my condition."

"That remains to be seen," he replied in a tone of intended menace. He turned to Rawton, who stood dumfounded with perplexity, and said quietly, "Your daughter, my lord, needs no medical advice; she may cure herself as soon as she wishes. And if you would hasten the process, keep her here, open the windows that she may profit by the fresh air, suffer her to eat and drink nothing that you cannot buy in the village, and—get rid of that Frenchwoman as soon as possible."

He nodded a salutation, and left father and daughter speechless with indignation.

But he was so clearly mad that it called for scarcely any cajoling on Vivienne's side to convince her father that the doctor's conduct was too ridiculous for indignation. In a few hours the current flowed on with its former placidity, and as if that absurd affair had not for a moment ruffled its surface. Nevertheless, Vivienne was disappointed. Dr. Sturgess was probably the only clever man in the village, and she had hoped to get some amusement out of him. She liked doctors, the susceptibility of clever men to her influence flattered her vanity; and the desperate attempts and inevitable failure to maintain a proper attitude of professional respect under the witchery of her eyes appealed to her sense of humour. What hours of piquant discussion and mirthful comparisons had these clever men provided for Vivienne and Thérèse!

Besides, it might be weeks before the neighbouring families called, and months before an interesting coterie

could be formed in this slow-going country, with its old-fashioned prejudices and stilted formality; meanwhile, with no man to fool, no sort of intrigue or admiration to keep the blood from stagnation, how was she to support existence in Rowton?

For lack of better alternative she determined to see what her cousin, Valentine Biron, was like, and bade her father write the following letter in time to catch the late post—

"Dear Nephew Valentine,

"You have probably seen the official notice of my resignation of the secretaryship of H.M. Embassy at St. Petersburg, after holding that onerous position for an uninterrupted period of over twenty years. The cause was my darling Vivienne's health. The patient martyr to an incomprehensible malady which has baffled the comprehension of the medical faculty of Germany and France, your cousin as a last resource has returned to her birthplace, where it is hoped the air may prove beneficial. We returned yesterday.

"This afternoon my sweet daughter casually mentioned that she had seen a highly eulogistic notice of a work written by you upon bacteria. It immediately struck me that the disease from which she is suffering might be due to the presence in her system of some bacterium which it has not occurred to her doctors to discover; and that here was an occasion for you to save the life of a young and most beautiful girl,

your cousin, and obtain a triumph which no man of science can afford to neglect.

"Pray set all other affairs aside and come to us without delay.

"Your affectionate uncle (whose title you must some day take),

"RAWTON."

This fatuous effusion was addressed to Valentine, at Hampton, in Yorkshire—where his father had died in the seventies, fixing the locality on Rawton's memory —and by one of those miracles which the post-office delights in, was forwarded to his rooms in Bloomsbury. Val read it with a smile—good humour prevailing over irritation—and having no "other affairs" to set aside, he yielded to the temptation which the prospect of ministering to a "most beautiful" cousin would naturally present to most healthy young men of eight and twenty. With a modest valise containing a dress-suit, toilet tackle, and other necessaries, he presented himself one afternoon at Rawton Hall, and, giving his name, was at once shown into the drawing-room.

The unexpected happened once more. Vivienne had entertained little hope of finding her cousin anything but a horror. A young man, she conceived, must have some physical defect to go in for science at all; he must be a perfect monster to write a big book about microbes and things at his age. She figured him at best a mild, weak-eyed, prematurely old young

man, with a bumpy forehead and lank, spare hair, with a mangy sort of beard probably, and a loose, shambling figure in ill-fitting clothes, just a bag of bones—a creature of the kind sent out by educational societies to grub for horrid bones in a dirty hole. What she saw was a well set-up, well-groomed, well-dressed young man, positively handsome, and with no sign of the savant upon him, save a rather broader forehead than is common, and wonderful eyes that looked as if they could penetrate a brick wall. And he had a clear, cheery voice, was vivacious, and altogether seemed awfully nice. She was so little prepared for such a cousin that she had taken no pains to be especially captivating. The dress she had worn for Dr. Sturgess would be quite good enough for him, she decided.

And it seemed to be quite good enough. He couldn't keep his eyes off her. Even when talking to her father his head would turn towards the couch on which she lay. Oh, there was fine fun to come with Cousin Val!

"May I make myself presentable?" he said. "Four hours on the Great Eastern," and he displayed his wristbands.

The bell was rung, and Thérèse answering, was instructed to show Mr. Biron to his room.

Her smart figure and neat ankles as she went before him up the stairs, excited his admiration. She opened the door, and, drawing back against the wall, pressed back her skirts with dimpled hands. Her eyes

were on the ground in maiden modesty for a moment; but as he passed her she raised them, and a smile curved her lips, and she twitched up her pretty eyebrows. Heaven knows what provoking invitation there was in that twitch; but, putting his own construction on it, Val took the challenge, catching her arms in his strong hands, and kissing her.

"He kiss me once, twice, right on ze mouse!" she told her mistress soon after.

Now this is a nice sort of young fellow to make a hero out of, isn't it?

SCENE II

VIVIENNE'S SCHEME

"DARLING," said Vivienne, smoothing her father's thin hand and gazing up into his rheumy eyes as he sat beside her while the former scene was taking place above stairs—"do you believe in intuitive perception?"

"Intuitive perception, hum! intuitive perception, ha!" The old man rolled the words over in his mouth with unction, astounded anew by his daughter's cleverness in broaching a subject with such redundant terms that even he could not immediately fathom their meaning. "Of course, my love, there's something in it. Intuitive perception in relation to, er—what, for example?"

"Cousin Val; what do you think of him?"

"The impression he conveys to my mind is, er, distinctly agreeable. He is a Biron every inch of him, with the good looks of his family; its vigour and virility." The old man lifted his head, squared his shaking elbows, and threw back his skrunken shoulders, being himself a Biron. "I must say that I am agreeably disappointed in my nephew. Bacteriology, I feared,

might have made him pedantic; but he seems to be free from affectation, faultless in form, and a splendid specimen—of his race. I am open, of course, to correction, my love; what is your opinion of him?"

"I feel," replied Vivienne, with the mystic tone of a sybil, "that he is my saviour."

"You don't say so!" gushed her father.

"I feel that he will bring me back the joys of health. I feel that he will give me life!"—pressing his hand to her lips; "I shall not have to leave you, darling."

"Now God be praised!" cried Rawton, flushing with emotion. "For surely some divinity inspired me with the idea of sending for Valentine."

Vivienne did not claim to be that divinity. It was sufficient to know that her scheme had been a happy one.

"Is it some subtle influence or merely hope that gives me strength? I cannot tell; but this I know, darling, I must come down to dinner to-night."

Rawton was in ecstasy. For some six months Vivienne had preferred to dine in seclusion—the old man's tedious attentions and wearisome fusiness giving less zest to her appetite than the spice supplied by the racy conversation of Thérèse.

Biron saw her at the dinner-table under a new aspect. Her dress was now as elaborate as before it had been simple. The cunning of two clever women had been exhausted in heightening the value of every charm, in masking every defect in her person. Her beauty dazzled his eyes and bewildered his senses for a time.

And his appearance satisfied her more critical examination. Fine men are not lacking in the Court of St. Petersburg; a gentleman of South Austria has eyes to enthral any woman who dared to look into them, and a nobleman of France can, if he choose, make himself irresistible, but of all the men she had ever met she could remember none who came quite up to Cousin Val in physical beauty. But then he was of the present, they of the past. His evident strength appealed to her imagination. He might take her up in his arms and crush her if he would. When he got over the embarrassment produced by sitting for the first time in his life close to a beautiful young woman extremely *decoletée*, his conversation became easy and light, bright and irrepressive. A happier little dinner was not to be imagined.

Rawton felt the "subtle influence" Vivienne had mentioned. There must certainly be something in it.

For otherwise, the quantity he ate and drank, and the brilliance of his repartee at this meal, was perfectly incomprehensible.

When the time came for Vivienne to withdraw she refused to be carried upstairs in the invalid-chair. She was quite sure she could do without it if Cousin Val would give her his big arm—only darling papa must not leave the table; his anxiety would make her nervous.

"It would give me greater support if you took my arm instead of I yours," she said at the foot of the stairs, looking up at him with her languishing eyes.

So he put his hand under her beautiful bare arm, and, clasping it to his side, led her upstairs with a sense of intoxication not wholly attributable to the champagne he had drunk.

In the corridor she offered him both hands and said, in a soft, low contralto, "Good night!" her head so bent that she looked upward under her brows into his eyes. He took them in his and she bent forward, clearly inviting him to embrace her. But he resisted the temptation, only pressing her hands a little closer before relinquishing them, and with a trembling "Good night," and an embarrassed smile, he turned and left her.

Why did he not kiss her? It would have been better had he recognized then that she was his cousin and treated her in cousinly fashion. Perhaps she was already something other than that to him; perhaps a slight raising of her brows, as she leant towards him, reminded him of Thérèse and checked the impulse.

Vivienne, with her blunted sense of delicacy, was unable to understand why a man having kissed her maid should refrain from kissing her when the opportunity was offered. She could not see that had he not kissed Thérèse he might have kissed her, because she failed to perceive the tacit insult in treating a lady with the cavalier freedom permitted to an impudent soubrette. Her knowledge of men and manners was entirely Continental, acquired by experience abroad and by her exhaustive study of Parisian literature.

She tarred all men with the same brush, and gave

none credit for chivalrous respect beyond that commanded by self-interest.

This was her first flirtation with an Englishman, and she asked herself, as an explanation of Valentine's extraordinary restraint, whether the mere fact of race could make this man different from the many lovers with whom she had intrigued. She recollected an English romance, peculiarly *bête*—in which a man after saying a few thoughtless words to a girl, felt bound to follow them up by an offer of marriage. Ah ! that must be the explanation : Valentine feared to compromise himself.

Thérèse ridiculed the notion. In a love affair the woman only can be compromised. A man may only be compromised in his dealings with more serious things—money or State secrets, for example. Nevertheless, Vivienne maintained her opinion : Vivienne believed that if he made love to her he must marry her, and he was not fool enough to jeopardize his independence. That was understandable, at any rate. There was promise of delightful excitement in pitting her seductive powers against the force of self-interest for the possession of Valentine's independence. She felt fairly confident that the victory must be hers. Her blood tingled with anticipation of keen delight in holding this strong man absolutely at her mercy. That position opened up a wide field of operation. What should she do with her triumph—magnanimously free him from his obligations—let him go, when it pleased her, the way of many another who had loved and ridden

away? Or should she exact the full penalty of his weakness and make him marry her?

The subject of marriage had occupied her thoughts much less than those of other girls. Her peculiar position as an English girl in a foreign country had given her that freedom for which foreign girls were willing to barter away body and soul. Of course she had no desire for the existence of a hen and chickens. Her ideal of marriage was a good position, a facile husband, and unrestrained freedom to flirt as long as her looks would bring lovers to her feet. It seemed to her that these requirements would be fully met by marriage with her cousin. He was not rich, to be sure —she had gathered that from the fact that he had written a book and from certain admissions at the dinner-table; but Rawton would be his, and he would take her father's title in due course, and at no very distant date probably. All other possessions would come to her, she knew. Valentine would take her father's place, in a way, and she would be just as well off as now; but in addition she would obtain a higher social position than any which had yet been offered. Before their meeting she had begrudged her cousin the heritage of Rawton and the title—with the envious greed of one who wants all, and a fierce resentment against the Salic law which barred the entail to her. Now she could regard Valentine with complacency and contemplate the reversion without rancour. All would be hers by such a marriage—estate, title, and hard cash

—all save a negligible quantity to meet her husband's modest necessity.

To Rawton's intense astonishment Vivienne came down to lunch the following morning—came down absolutely unaided.

"Darling, I don't know when I have slept so sweetly and so well," she said, as she kissed the old man. As a matter of fact, speculation had kept her awake to an unusual hour.

"I am sorry you have no company but mine, love; but Val it seems has gone out for a long walk—a note tells us he will return not earlier than three or four."

"So much the better, darling. I have you all to myself for a few hours." She had learnt of Valentine's expedition from Thérèse with a smile, and perhaps rightly attributed it to a desire on his part to brace himself up and strengthen his purpose to stand firm under the temptations that beset him.

"It is simply miraculous, my love," said Rawton, when he had ceased to fuss about his daughter's wraps and cushions, her tastes and fancies, and she herself had dismissed the servant. "This change in you is not less remarkable than it is Providential." Vivienne had helped herself to a respectable portion of Perigord pie. "I say Providential advisedly; for Valentine's scientific treatment, from which we hoped so much, has not yet been put to the test. Indeed, I think we have little to expect from that; for with that modesty which distinguishes genius—especially in our family—

he disclaims exceptional knowledge in medicine or the treatment of bacterial disease. He put it rather prettily last night when we were discussing the subject; he said that hitherto he had sought bacteria in muddy ponds rather than in beautiful young women."

"Don't you think, darling, that health is due as greatly to personal influence as to the use of drugs?" Vivienne asked.

Rawton pushed aside his plate, and put his dexter to his bent brows reflectively. Family genius, through his wonderful daughter, he saw, was about to put another poser.

"I don't mean mesmerism or any vulgar practice; but those favourable conditions to which all organisms are subject."

"I follow you, my darling; proceed."

"For example, it is known that a young child living constantly with a very old person acquires old ways, and even a certain decrepitude of body. Now, why should not a weak person, brought in contact with one of exceptional strength, imbibe that superabundant something which, for lack of a better word, we call energy? Is it not possible that health and strength, brimming over as it were, from Cousin Val, should flow into my poor being and reanimate its forces?"

"A most profound deduction! I wonder it had not occurred to me," gushed the astonished and delighted old man; "there must be something in it. But such exhaustive reflection, my love, is unsuited to

your age and sex. It disquiets me. I would have you turn your thoughts to lighter subjects," he added with tremulous anxiety.

"I will if you wish it, darling," she replied, stretching out her hand and clinging to his—she had ordered her service to be placed quite close to his for a purpose. "My only desire is to regain health for your dear sake. You shall think for me—you who are so clever."

And to that end she led him up by the most simple remarks and observations to the conception of an idea which startled him by its originality and profundity. And this idea was to unite all interests and promote general happiness by marrying Vivienne to Valentine. Of course, the thing must be arranged with diplomatic precaution. The ground must be carefully sounded, and, above all, suspicion of his vast project must be kept from Vivienne, whose delicate susceptibilities would be shocked by untimely revelation. Under skilful control of circumstances, which it would be his duty to see to, the thing must seem to develop with a mutual affinity of sentiment in the young people, the first idea of marriage should appear to be spontaneous to them, though he doubted if it could ever occur unaided to Vivienne's virginal imagination.

All the afternoon long he paced his study pondering this weighty subject; and Vivienne knowing this perfectly well, prepared to hook her fish, and land him with the least possible delay.

SCENE III

A DANGEROUS RIVAL

Meanwhile a very dangerous rival was taking possession of Mr. Valentine Biron. This is how it came about. Tempted by a brisk breeze and a blue sky, he had walked over the open heath to Cromeby-on-the-Sea. And indeed he stood in need of a more wholesome atmosphere and more invigorating influences than were to be found under the roof of Rawton Hall. At Cromeby he hired a wheel, and climbing noble hills, coasting still more agreeably down heathery slopes, pedalling slowly through sleepy villages, and putting on pace in the road that traverses the salt marshes, he reached Salford, feeling a better and stronger man for the healthy exercise. Any questions of conscience that might have rendered him uneasy in the early morning were gone now. He simply felt that it was good to live, and that this was a lot better than Bloomsbury and, he should have added, Rawton. After lunch he struck inland, and taking the sun for his guide rather than the conflicting sign-posts, he threaded his way homeward through sunny lane and shady wood. Then, coming to a great

spread of beech trees, he found himself in a leafy tunnel, with great boughs meeting overhead for a stretch of half a mile. And there in the vista he caught sight of a bright patch by the roadside, as if the sun had pierced the sombre shade; but it turned out to be only a girl standing disconsolately beside her bike.

She glanced up at him as he drew near—once to see whether he was a gentleman or cad, and again to learn whether he was morose or amiable—and agreeably assured on both points, she made a step towards him, facing him with as much boldness as she could muster. Seeing that she wanted to speak, Valentine stepped down in a moment.

"My tyre has gone down, and I have no pump," she explained timidly, rather awed by the height of the gentleman as he stood before her, his handsome face, and fine bearing. She thought he must be a cavalry officer.

"Happily I have one," replied Valentine, glancing at his hired wheel. He set his machine against the bank, fitted his pump and began to inflate. She bent down also, watching the operation with anxiety. That drew back her short cycling skirt and revealed a very pretty foot in a silk stocking and neatly fitting shoe of the daintiest pattern.

"I fear it's a case for patching rather than pumping," said Biron, testing the flabby tyre after a dozen or so of energetic strokes.

"Oh dear!" replied the young lady.

"Yes, it's no go," he said emphatically, after another trial.

"And I've no repairing outfit."

"Nor I either," said Valentine, looking in the tool bag. "What's to be done? May I run across to Cromeby and get you a machine where I hired mine—it can't be very far."

"Five miles, and—there are trippers." She glanced apprehensively up and down the road. "No, I think I would rather walk home."

"Have you far to go?"

"Nearly seven miles. I live at Rawton."

"By happy accident I also am staying there. You will let me see you through your difficulty?"

"With the greatest pleasure. I never know what to do with a troublesome tripper until about five minutes after I ought to have done it."

Her freedom from constraint and the smartness of her remark led him for a moment to think she must be an American; but as he turned from clipping the inflator and looked her fairly in the face he saw she could be nothing but English. Her eyes were blue as the sky, her cheek a study in tender pink; there was sunlight in her hair and in her smile. Honesty and wholesome ideas underlay the open candour of her smile and the unflinching confidence of her regard. She was not beautiful, but undoubtedly pretty; and there was nothing doll-like in the character of her

prettiness. Her nose was too long, her mouth a little too wide perhaps (but, then, she had such faultless teeth to show), her chin and the line of her cheek too delicate for that. A certain arch coyness in the expression of her face and the poise of her head indicated vivacity and sufficient liveliness of disposition. So she appeared to Valentine shrinking and tender and sympathetic, striking a chord in his heart untouched by his cousin or her maid.

"It's rather like a fairy story, isn't it?" she pursued; "a dark wood haunted by dreadful creatures, and a damsel in distress to be succoured——"

"By a knight-errant in search of adventures. Unfortunately I cannot take you up on my saddle," said Valentine, continuing her theme as they walked beside their wheels. "Why doesn't some inventive genius devise an adjustable cycle pillion for the occasion?"

"A capital idea for a Christmas card. The damsel in a watteau dress perched behind her cavalier. It would really be very pretty."

"With you for the model."

The young lady acknowledged his compliment with a smiling inclination of her pretty head.

"I hope I am not keeping you from any engagement," she said, with sudden gravity.

"None that I have any cause to regret. If we could only get rid of these abominable midges," he said, flicking his handkerchief at a cloud of pursuing gnats.

Then he turned with surprise, his companion having stopped with a peal of uncontrollable laughter.

"Have I said anything unintentionally funny?" he asked.

"Yes. I happen to be a Midge," she replied. "It isn't my actual name, of course. But it has come down to that; perhaps because I, too, am sometimes troublesome. . . . Are you staying at the inn?"

"No, with relations. I arrived yesterday—my excuse for not knowing other residents."

"Oh, we are only fugitive residents, Granny and I. We live at the Rectory for a few months, when it is too hot to live comfortably anywhere else. Granny calls them our respectable months, and, I think, looks upon them as a penance—especially towards the end of the time—for being homeless vagabonds the rest of the year. I believe we know every hotel in habitable Europe."

"This accounts for cosmopolitan manners," thought Valentine.

"I wonder who in the world—that tiny world of Rawton—he can be staying with?" thought the Midge.

"But there are some pleasant residents to be found in Rawton, besides Granny and yourself, I suppose," said Val.

"Very few. There's the rector and his family, but they go away to make room for us, and there are two amiable farmers, and there's one delightful old doctor and then there are the great folks at the Hall, who

have just come, but they are much too mighty for us to dream of knowing."

"I have heard of a Dr. Sturgess."

"That's he. And if it weren't for him we should never come here year after year."

"Is he part of the penance?" Val asked, having heard a very damning account of the "old madman" from his uncle.

"Oh dear, no! He sifts our ashes and smooths our sackcloth, Granny declares. I love him, and I'm sure you will like him."

"Because you like him——"

"Because every one must love him who admires strength and courage, honesty and kindness," she said, flushing with loyal enthusiasm in the praise of a friend. "Though I dare say he could be intensely disagreeable to stuck-up persons like——"

"Like the great people at the Hall," Val suggested quietly.

"Yes; though I don't know that they are stuck-up," she hastened to add, with the sudden apprehension that this gentleman, so different from the village residents, might be one of the "great people."

"I shall try to make the acquaintance of Dr. Sturgess. A man with the courage of his convictions is a man to know," said Valentine. And then he turned the subject, convincing the girl in her supposition, and they fell to talking of all sorts of things, save Rawton. So pleasantly were those six miles tramped

without one weary pause. On the top of Rawton Heath they came suddenly upon a comely old lady with white hair and the settled expression of perpetual good humour, coming slowly up the hill in a pony carriage.

"Granny!" exclaimed Midge, with new delight in her face. And all meeting, she turned to Valentine and said, "May I introduce you, Granny? Mrs. Magister, Mr.——"

"Biron," said he.

* * * * *

Vivenne's temper was admirable. She had schooled herself to conceal irritation on all occasions and to display amiability whenever it might serve a purpose. Observation had shown her how easily the keen edge of infatuation may be dulled by tension. A man's dogged perseverance in business is matched by his lack of patience in lighter matters; and though an exacting beauty may get a good deal out of her lovers in the beginning the system won't work in the long run, and she finds herself a loser at the end of the game.

She was sweetly reasonable with Valentine when they met at dinner, only scolding him for his neglect sufficiently to make forgiveness the more charming. She had kept her room constantly until now, and she knew her cousin was too modest to think that his presence could so specially affect her disposition and inclinations. She accepted the explanation of his delay as the most natural thing in the world, and her curiosity to know all about Miss Magister was

untinged by a suspicion of jealousy. She adored those open-minded, simple girls, just as she preferred fair complexions to dark. One felt the influence of such sunny natures in kindlier sentiments and better hopes. If Miss Magister would not call upon her she would certainly venture to call on Miss Magister, who must see that the visit was prompted by no vulgar motive of condescension, but by the sincere desire to find a companion of her own age in such a charming girl. And undoubtedly she intended to put this promise into execution as soon as possible, though her real motive was securely locked in her own dark breast.

From Miss Magister conversation turned by easy and natural transition to music, and Vivienne, drawing an admission from her cousin that he "strummed" a little, she made him promise to play to her after dinner —fugitive recollections, a few harmonious chords, anything that would satisfy her craving for sweet sounds.

And so they presently went into the drawing-room, where Vivienne had a couch wheeled into a position where she commanded the player at the piano. She begged her father not to fuss about her, and only asked her cousin to raise her feet when she had posed her body in the cushions. Those feet were prettier even than Miss Magister's, and more ravishingly clad.

Valentine played well. He began with something in the "Chocolate cream" way by St. Saens. It was during the playing of this piece that another strikingly original idea occurred to Rawton. He would quietly

leave those two young people to themselves. Music might develop the growth of that sentiment which he devoutly hoped would ultimately lead to marriage. That was the subtle concept which struck him as being in accordance with the best traditions of diplomacy applied to domestic affairs. Thanking Val for his very delightful performance, he regretted that some very important letters to write deterred him from having more—at present, and withdrew.

"You played that to please me; now play to please yourself," said Vivienne, sweetly and low, as the door closed.

"The two should go together," Valentine replied, smiling at her. How beautiful she looked lying there under the soft warm light of the shaded candles!

He played again, Bach this time, and having played, rose from the piano—"not to make a bore of it," said he to himself.

"How can I thank you for that!" murmured Vivienne, stretching out her hand. What could he do but take it in his—how otherwise respond to the clinging pressure of her fingers. "If you write music it must be like that—strong and passionate. Sit by me, if you will not play again." She indicated a floor cushion. He drew it beside the couch and sat, his head being brought to a level with hers.

"Why do we admire strength in men?" she asked. "Is it because strength is the complement of our weakness—that nature prompts us to draw from them the vigour that we lack?"

"As men the tenderness that women supply—perhaps," answered Valentine.

"Oh, that I needed strength no more than you needed tenderness!" she sighed. Then dropping her voice almost to a whisper and trembling with emotion, said: "Tell me, dear cousin, shall I live?"

"Great heavens! what makes you doubt it?"

"The very wish to live. The yearning that one feels looking at a sunset, a flower, anything that fades."

"Fade and die everything must in its time. But that time is too far away for you to think of yet."

"I want to live, I want to live," she repeated pathetically. And then she stretched forth her hand again.

She was thinking of Miss Magister, and saw that she must force the pace and be well ahead before the other girl got into the running. In love some women may take years to play their lover, whilst others can scarcely be too precipitate, and must strike their man at once before he sees the hook, or lose him. And Vivienne knew by experience that she belonged to the latter class.

Valentine took her hand once more, closing it between his palms, blind to all perception of artifice, seeing only the pathos in that beautiful pleading face. A tear glistened in her dark lashes—for even a bad orator can force a tear by his own superficial eloquence.

"You will live," he said; "you have been cheated by a set of charlatans. I have seen their prescriptions, and if they prove anything it is that you have none of the maladies they indicate."

"And you will do what they have failed to do. You will bring me back to health; you will save me," she said in a crescendo of excitement. "You will examine me to-morrow. Why not now? Will you sound me? Perhaps we ought to ring for Thérèse," she added, with a change of tone and that significant raising of the eyebrows at the dawn of a smile.

"Oh no, no! For Heaven's sake, don't do that!" cried Valentine in terror.

"Why should there be any reserve between us? Oh, Valentine!" soft as a sigh.

"I'm not a doctor, you know," said the poor man in faint resistance.

"But you must know the symptoms of the disease. You can tell if my heart is weak; feel how it beats now." She drew his hand to her side and held it there.

"Though if it beat so painfully there may be another cause," she murmured; and a smile twitched in the corner of her mouth, as her teeth closed upon her under-lip and she looked up into his face—so close to hers that his hot breath fell upon her cheek—with those long wicked eyes.

She stretched up her disengaged hand and drew his face closer, slid her arm round his neck, and brought his lips to hers.

"Love me, love me!" she murmured: "give me love and life!"

Outside Thérèse waited, her ear to the door—a jackal waiting for the leavings of a lioness.

SCENE IV

AT THE RECTORY

Valentine was neither an Anthony nor a Juan, but that combination of saint and sinner which constitutes many a good man. Where a man with less moral strength and wider experience might have escaped, he, from uncalculating simplicity, fell. He knew no women; love had formed no part of his amusements. For three years he had stuck steadfastly to hard work—the dull grind of collecting material for his book, and working it into shape, occupying his mind day and night, with Saturday golf and Sunday outings as sole recreation. And now that the work was put aside he was like a boy let loose from school. There was a good deal of the old Adam in him, plus gentlemanly feeling (not possessed by his ancestor), which forbade him to lay the blame on the woman. As the stronger vessel he felt himself responsible for all that had happened, and did not attempt to shirk his responsibilities. From the moment Vivienne said to him, "I am yours for ever, darling!" he recognized that he also was hers for the same indefinite period. He saw that sooner or later he must marry her—not without a pang of regret for the hard

work to be abandoned, and the working out of another book suggested by his publisher as a sequel to his successful work on bacteria. The idea of marriage had scarcely presented itself to his imagination before that passionate outbreak. And it never occurred to him now to attribute that outburst to an excess of cousinly affection, and to plead working as an excuse for clearing out of Rawton the next day. But that means of escape suggested itself to Vivienne at once, and she took care to block the way.

"My dear father must never be allowed to suspect what has happened, love," she said. "Your impulsiveness, naughty one, would shock him terribly. He could never forgive you, and then—what would become of poor me!" The tie of relationship by her adroit management only served to bind her lover more securely. The use she made of cousinship to cover freer intercourse debarred his using it in an opposite direction. Stealth and secrecy sealed the bond.

But although Vivienne gave him plainly to understand, with the utmost delicacy, of course, that he would have to marry her as soon as time would sanction a formal declaration to darling papa, she gave Valentine very early intimation that justice would be tempered with mercy, and that she intended to make no despotic use of her power over him—that he should have a free hand in fact when she was his wife. When he felt it his duty to confess that he had once kissed Thérèse, she smiled at his embarrassment.

"You wicked, wicked man!" she said, tapping his hand, and then pressing it to her breast. "I suppose I must forgive you. Every man has his amourettes before or after marriage; and it is quite too bourgeois for a wife to make herself or any one else miserable over little peccadilloes."

Valentine rather feared (for the girl's sake) that his confession would be followed by her dismissal. But nothing of the kind took place, naturally—she being an admirable maid and about as clever as her mistress.

Another step she took to show her entire freedom from the tiresome mania of jealousy. She insisted upon his going with her to call on that charming Miss Magister. "Though I expect you will flirt with her most abominably," she said, with a smile of foregone forgiveness. Open candour and indulgence is an admirable safeguard against secret philandering.

Valentine submitted with a good grace, of course, albeit with an inner repugnance for which he could in no way account. He associated Miss Magister with the breezy health, sunlight, and the wholesome odour of beech and fir trees. He wished to see her again, to repeat the experiences of their first meeting; the same tender sentiment, the same unreserved interchange of thought would be impossible in the presence of Vivienne. Why? What was it that made the meeting of those two girls repugnant to his feeling? Was it that Midge was to him the embodiment of purity and sweet honesty, and that he was detecting something so opposite beneath

the paint and perfume of his cousin? But he regarded the friendship of those two with an instinctive perception that the lovely innocence of the one might be sullied and defiled by contact with the other—that Vivienne's lips might leave a stain on Midge's cheek.

Vivienne fell in love with Miss Magister the moment she saw her. So she said, and her manner supported the assertion. She was cordially amiable from the very first. (Who but a fool shows a bad hand?)

"My cousin has raved about you to such an extent that I could not resist the temptation to call upon you," she said to Midge; "but already you have converted curiosity to a better sentiment. Although in strict form," she added, turning to Mrs. Magister, "you ought first to have called upon us."

"Noblesse oblige," said Mrs. Magister, with a courtesy.

"Raison de plus," answered Vivienne, with a graceful inclination of her beautiful head.

They presently walked round the Rectory garden, Vivienne walking with Mrs. Magister, to give perfect freedom to Valentine following with Midge.

Midge seemed under a little constraint at first—perhaps because the memory of their long, delightful walk had secretly been so dear to her; but Valentine was far more silent and "jerky" and ill at ease. However, a caterpillar humping his way across the path took them out of themselves, and by the time he was

picked up and safely ensconced on a rose they had regained their former footing, and Midge, looking up into her companion's face with the same open smile and arch turn of the head, read in the depth of his eyes the same tender kindness that had won her heart. Then their tongues were loosed and laughter rippled in the same channel. It refreshed Val's somewhat fatigued senses with God knows what strange sentiment of hope. The song of the lark, the first breath of spring, the scent of new-mown hay were in her very presence.

Returning across the lawn they met Dr. Sturgess stumping down from the house.

Vivienne recognized him at once.

"You are surprised to see me here," she said, after the usual formalities.

"Not at all," he said; "there is no pleasanter place in Rawton when you are here," he added, with a smiling nod to Midge and her grandmother.

"My cousin has absolutely cured me!"

"That's not a bit more surprising," replied the old doctor, coldly. Then turning to Valentine, he said—

"I should be glad to know you, Mr. Biron. If you ever feel the need of fresh air and a man's society come to the top of Rawton Hill for our mutual advantage."

"You will stay and take tea with us," said Mrs. Magister, as they approached the stand set under the oak.

"May I?" asked Vivienne, appealing to Valentine. "You see," she explained to Mrs. Magister, "although

I was born at Rawton, English manners and forms are quite foreign to me through living abroad all my life, and I don't wish to commit a solecism the moment I enter English society."

"I assure you we avoid formality to the best of our ability," laughed Mrs. Magister.

"Why, then, the bar of friendship is broken down already, and you will teach me many things that I want to know. There is so much to learn if I am to settle down at all respectably in England. How do you make this delicious tea?" The stuff was poison to her after the straw-coloured infusion she made in her own samovar from a leaf that cost six roubles a pound in St. Petersburg.

Then conversation became general, and every one was lively and well pleased, save Dr. Sturgess, who, seated a little apart from the group with his elbows resting on his knees, looked on and munched a dry biscuit in moody silence.

A great deal is to be picked up even from general conversation by a shrewd observer. And no observer was more shrewd that Dr. Sturgess. Every word that fell upon his ear was analyzed, every look or gesture was noted by his small grey eyes—curiously active in comparison with the measured movements of his cumbrous person—and all formed material for speculation and deduction.

Then the party broke up, and they fell to discussing each other, as is usual.

"You are quite right, Midge," said Mrs. Magister; "Mr. Biron is exceptionally nice."

Dr. Sturgess nodded. Midge could have hugged him for that sign of approval.

"And the Lady Vivienne is perfectly charming!"

Dr. Sturgess sidelong spat out a chip of biscuit.

"Do you think they can be engaged?"

"Granny!" exclaimed Midge, "what on earth should make you think that?"

"Well, there seemed to me a kind of proprietary manner about her, and her way of appealing to him."

"But they are cousins—and they have only seen each other for ten days."

"That may account for the engagement," said Dr. Sturgess; "had he known her for ten months he might have escaped."

"Then you also think they are engaged?" said Mrs. Magister.

"Sure of it. Title and estate go to the young fellow, and Lady Vivienne does not intend to lose anything by her father's death."

"Doctor! you surely cannot think that sweet girl capable of such cold calculation."

"Calculation! Every action of her day is studied, from the stippling of her face in the morning to the drugging of her senses at night."

"Doctor!" Mrs. Magister's tone of remonstrance was almost indignant.

The sturdy doctor turned his shoulder to her indifferently—to follow Midge with his eyes. She had quietly risen from her seat and was walking towards the house with bent head.

"Touched," he said to himself with a sigh, then to Mrs. Magister with a jerk of the head—

"What a pity, Granny!"

"But do you really think Lady Vivienne——"

"I am not thinking at all of that worthless young person—I am thinking of Midge and Mr. Biron. And here's the pity of it—that they should not have met and mated before that painted devil stepped into their path."

He turned away, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, staring straight before him, and tapping his toes on the ground in an impatient rhythm.

Mrs. Magister had never seen him so violent and unreasonably vexed before. When she could recover breath she said quietly—

"Mr. Biron is nothing to Midge."

"Well, if he isn't he ought to be."

"I am sure she has no feeling of that kind."

"Oh, nonsense! Do you think I don't know the symptoms of heart-sickness? I do know them, and so do you. Do you wish me to believe that the probability of marriage between Midge and Mr. Biron had not entered your head, that it didn't occur to you when Midge first introduced you, that it wasn't in your mind when you saw them together to-day? Did you not see their happiness in each other, and draw your conclusions

from it? Of course you did. You may be a hypocrite, Granny, for you're a woman; but I know you're not blind, for you see as well as I can."

"And possibly better, doctor," retorted the old lady; "for I can see good where you see only evil. It's as well, perhaps, that Mr. Biron is engaged to his cousin, for poor Midge could not have been his wife."

"Why not?"

"Before long Mr. Biron will be Lord Rawton, while Midge——" She dropped her voice, glancing towards the house.

"While Midge is the daughter of Dudley St. John, convicted murderer, now in penal servitude at Dartmoor. Well, what of that? She does not know; and I don't intend to tell her. Do you?"

"God forbid!" said she; adding, after a moment's reflection: "But I suppose her future husband will have to be told before her marriage?"

"It will be a pretty test of his worth," replied Dr. Sturgess, screwing up his little eyes upon the horizon. "I don't believe it would make a pin of difference to a man of young Biron's stamp."

A meditative pause ensued, and then Mrs. Magister said quietly—

"I suppose I ought to let the Rev. Jenkins know that we shall not want the Rectory next year?"

"Not want the Rectory next year!" exclaimed the doctor, arousing brusquely. "Why?"

"Don't you know that St. John comes out of prison next year?"

"Perfectly well. He comes out in March."

"Well?"

"Well?"

"He is sure to come to look for my poor child whom he left here!"

"She is dead—buried twenty years ago."

"But his daughter lives, and he will find out that Midge, though she does not bear his name, is that daughter; and he will levy blackmail as the price of keeping her secret and leaving her to me."

"The greater reason for facing him and fighting the battle out at once. Leave him to me. I know how to silence the rascal. If he thinks you fear him he will bleed you to a certainty, and flight will not save you."

"I couldn't risk it. Think of Midge—if the poor girl should learn that she is the daughter of such a wretch!"

"As you please; but don't let him learn the moment he comes, next year, that you have been living here summer after summer, and are keeping out of the way for the first time. That will put him on your track at once. He'll find you at your hiding-place for a certainty, and I shall not be there to help you. Now go in and look as cheerful as you can. Midge needs you."

Dr. Sturgess turned his steps towards Rawton Hill, saying to himself, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."

SCENE V

THE DOCTOR'S INTERVENTION

"I THINK Miss Magister is perfectly delightful!" said Vivienne, as they drove from the Rectory. "Such a sunny little soul, with her pretty teeth and her dimples, and those lovely blue eyes. I shall ask her to be my bridesmaid, darling," she added, taking Valentine's hand and squeezing it.

Of course he pressed her hand in return, but in an obviously perfunctory spirit, and his face expressed no enthusiasm in her project.

"I am not surprised that you were so smitten with her," she continued; "won't it be charming to have her in our house, staying quite a long while as a common friend?"

If she herself could not be like Midge—and she had not the slightest wish to change places with her in any respect—she desired Valentine to understand she had no wish to control his tastes or debar his flirting as much as he pleased with the girl after his marriage. The suggestion disgusted Valentine, and conveyed such an affront to his sense of honour, that he doubted if she actually realized what her words implied. She could not think him capable of amusing himself at the

expense of an innocent girl—of putting a friend whom she professed to love on a footing with Thérèse. But that was precisely what she did think he might do in common with any other man of her class whom she had met or heard of.

"Rum old fellow, Dr. Sturgess!" said Valentine, dropping her hand and changing the subject abruptly. "Absolutely mad, I should say. He was outrageously insolent to my darling father, who, you know, is habitually amiable and courteous. His only civility to-day was addressed to you. I expect he has read your book and wants to talk shop—or say something particularly unpleasant about us. You must go up after dinner and see him, and tell me all about it when you come back."

That she should wish him to be on friendly terms with a man who had grossly offended her father seemed to Valentine also a want of fine feeling on her part; but he attributed this opinion to his own captiousness and an unwonted irritability of temper just now for which he could not account; and with an effort to overcome his repulsion, he gallantly turned the subject by saying that when he felt the need of a man's company Vivienne must be absent.

He tried his utmost to be cheerful and entertaining; nevertheless the dull pressure on his heart was not to be removed, and Vivienne saw clearly through the mask thrown over his unhappiness. A rupture was imminent, and only to be averted by Thérèse, care, and

tact. He was thinking of the other girl, longing for her, secretly wondering if the mistake he had fallen into was irreparable. That she knew, and determined to give him no loophole for escape, no pretext for breaking the moral tie by which his fate was knitted to hers. If the strain upon his feelings was not relaxed his self-control might give way, he might blurt out the whole truth, and confessing that he loved Midge as he could never love her, beg Vivienne to release him. His spirit might revolt against the hypocrisy of pretending to love her while this infatuation for Midge was still upon him ; and to obviate that disaster she withdrew to her room immediately after dinner, pleading fatigue as an excuse to escape the customary drawing-room *tête-à-tête*.

Val was grateful. With a panama and a cigar he strode into the open with an exhilarating sense of relief and release which he tried not to analyze. "Any room would be stuffy and unbearable on a night like this," he said to himself, but the fact was not to be blinked ; it was the morally mephitic atmosphere of the Hall that oppressed him. Already he felt the need suggested by Dr. Sturgess of a purer air and the society of some one other than the woman there. It was a hideous pretence to make love to Vivienne, while his heart was with Midge, as repugnant to his honest nature as wilful lying —disloyalty to Vivienne, Midge, and to himself alike.

So soon it had come to this ! He was glad to escape the caresses of the woman he was to marry and live with to life's end.

Would it come right in time—as it comes to so many who marry the wrong woman? Would indifference succeed repulsion as repulsion had followed in the train of passion, and out of indifference would affection spring up? Affection! that tender sympathetic sentiment of kindred tastes and inclinations which Midge inspired in his heart—could it ever exist between Vivienne and himself? Could she ever be his sweetest comrade and dearest friend, taking the place that Midge seemed sent by Heaven to fill?

Outside the park gates, his steps quite unintentionally took the direction of his thoughts. In the obscurity he saw nothing but the sward under his eyes, and failed to recognize his surroundings until the sound of a young voice brought him to a sudden stand. He was on the skirt of the Rectory grounds. Midge was on the further side of that hedge. It was her voice he heard, distinguishable to his ear as the note of the lark from other songsters. Might he draw nearer and get one glimpse of her, catch again the music from her lips, gratify the yearning of his senses for sweet food? She might come from the gate, tempted by the open freshness of the heath; they might meet quite naturally, if he waited for a few minutes.

"No, she shall not be dragged into this," said he to himself; and conquering temptation, he strode off in the opposite direction. That road, with like lack of intention, he followed to the top of Rawton Hill. He paused there to drink in the cool air creeping up

from the sea, to watch the moon's great coppery disc rising through the mist that hung over the distant salt marshes, a segment cut by the great structure of a dismantled mill which stood out gaunt and black against the light.

"Qui si sana?" said a voice at his elbow, and turning, he found the burly doctor planted there, his face in the half-light massive as that of a marble Jove. "It must be close and stifling down there," he continued, with a nod towards the Hall; "there's ever a wholesome breeze up here. I'm glad you've come, and you'll not regret it."

"The moon's magnificent," said Valentine, evasively.

"She'll be finer seen from above. Come with me." Dr. Sturgess led his visitor towards the mill.

The mill was the finest in East Anglia, built of stone four stories high. Besides the lower gallery another had been built out below the hood; the view from there was one of the attractions vaunted by the guide books to Cromeby. If the look of a visitor pleased the critical doctor, he would give courteous admission; to the rest his refusal was point-blank and decisive. The "mad doctor" had bought the mill, taken out the machinery, and converted it into a dwelling-house, and there he lived alone, attended by an old man who lodged in an adjoining cottage.

Sturgess led the way up the steep steps from floor to floor, and finally out upon the upper gallery. There Valentine stood for some time in silence, awed by the

dizzy height and the grandeur of the view. The moon had now risen higher, and turned from copper to brass, throwing a long path of light across the sea that spread in a vast semicircle to the horizon. Softened by a thin veil of mist, the undulating country for miles and miles inland lay grey and still in the horizontal light. Valentine turned from contemplation on the wonderful spectacle with a sigh.

"That's the only fitting commentary," said the doctor. "Shall we sit here? You see I hoped you would come," he indicated a table with provision for smoking and drinking set hard by in the gallery.

Valentine took a cigar and seated himself on the bench that encircled the wall of the mill, and the doctor followed his example. Then they lit up and smoked for a couple of minutes in a silence that harmonized with the surroundings as much as the extraordinary character of the doctor with their present position.

"Your father is dead," Dr. Sturgess began at length.

"He has been dead many years."

"I did not know it till I bought your book."

"May I ask how you learned it from that. My father also wrote, and his name, like mine, was Valentine."

"From that very fact. Had he been living there would have been something to differentiate you on the title-page. The contents showed me that it could not have been written by an old man."

"It must be difficult to discern a man's character from writing of that kind."

"One can hardly work out a sum in long division without betraying character. In your book I found sufficient to form an estimate which has not materially altered since Miss Magister described her meeting with you. Your father and I were together at Oxford," proceeded the doctor, giving Valentine no time for commentary. "I owe a good deal to his friendship. He helped me to get a practice here, and that has given me independence. The debt is not forgotten, and I should like to repay it to his son."

"I will take another cigar, and square the account," said Valentine, smiling.

"How would a flat in this mill serve you for a study — the one on which we are sitting, for instance?"

"Gloriously! By George, what work a man could do up here!"

"You have to write another volume. The last is barely more than an introduction."

"That's what my publisher says."

"When will you begin?"

"God knows!" answered Valentine, his tone dropping from enthusiasm to despair.

"Has it gone so far as that?" asked Dr. Sturgess, leaning forward, and laying his hand on Val's arm impressively.

"What do you mean, doctor?"

"Have you fallen so low that you fear you may

never rise again? Have those painted harlots at the Hall gained such ascendency——"

"Do you wish to insult me?" asked Valentine, rising abruptly, and interrupting the doctor's vehemence.

"I mean to save you by means no matter what. Should I study nice handling if I saw you about to throw yourself over this handrail? Should I be nicer still where more than your body is engaged—where your soul is in danger? That woman——"

"Is my cousin," said Valentine.

"Tell me she's no more than that, and I'll thank God I'm in the wrong, and ask her pardon on my knees. You intend to marry her," he pursued, after a pause that gave ample time for reflection. "You intend to marry her from a false sense of honour. You have committed a fault, and think to redeem it by another and far graver offence. You think to repair an error by a crime. For the thing you would do is moral suicide. You would cast away your life in atonement for the aberration of a moment, unjustified even by that infatuation which passes unworthily for the noble quality of love."

"How about the woman?" asked Valentine.

"She loses no more than she has risked, and what the value of that is her holding of it shows. It is hard to find pity, even for one who holds the sanctity of womanhood so cheap. And you would marry her; make her the mother of your children? You should think of them. What kind of children can spring from such a

tainted source? what hope is there for their happiness under such influence as hers? That false sense of honour that may justify self-destruction will not excuse the wrong you do to them." He paused again, and the storm of his anger being spent, he continued, in tones as tender as they had been harsh. "And think what might be, my dear fellow—a marriage made for love, not for shame, for your joy and not your endless remorse. Think of the pure, fresh wife, whose healthy spirit would fill your life with happiness and make its duties pleasant—of bright, happy youngsters growing up about you, with love and honesty for their heritage. Is it too late to choose between these two?"

"I have promised, virtually, to marry my cousin."

"In any specified time?"

"No."

"Then sit down and write your book first—you would never write it after. Begin at once—here or elsewhere, as your senses dictate. Can you promise me that?"

"Yes."

"Then I will promise you this: if by the time your book is finished, you do not see your way to break off the engagement, she shall."

"She?"

"Yes, she—your cousin. Little as she merits consideration, it was to spare her humiliation that I first appealed to you."

And with this enigma the sturdy doctor closed the subject.

SCENE VI

VALENTINE'S RESOLUTION

Valentine left Rawton Hill with a sense of exhilaration, attributable partly to the brisk wholesome air and partly to the prospect of getting into collar again and doing more good work—a sentiment felt by every energetic man after a season of idleness, but still more from the possibility of breaking the bonds which were to fetter him for life to Vivienne. The joy in his heart was the joy of recovered freedom—of a captive escaped from a snare. And the promise of release winged his imagination with hope.

Nevertheless, the task before him was one to damp the spirits of a man less delicately sensitive. For he had made up his mind at once that the thing to be done must be done at once. There should be no temporizing subterfuge, no cooling down by easy stages, no casting the onus of final rupture upon Vivienne, no evasion of his own responsibilities. The thing looked mean enough in all conscience as it stood. And some sort of meanness there must be in it, or why should there be any difficulty in stating the plain truth? There was something brutal in telling Vivienne

that he did not love her as a man should love the woman he is to marry, in giving her whom he had clasped to his breast to understand even by implication that she fell short of his ideal of a good woman. Yet it had to be done somehow, and at once.

About the Hall the air was oppressive and close. On the terrace stood a table with a couple of shaded wax candles; not a breath flickered the flame.

Rawton paced the marble, restless with an idea of greater magnitude and more originality than usual.

Catching Valentine's step upon the drive, he met him at the head of the steps with extended hand.

"Glad to see you back, my boy," said he. "I wanted five minutes' chat with you—on general matters, of course—before turning in. Your influence is distinctly soothing. Indeed, I don't know how we could do without you here—either Vivienne or myself."

This was a difficult opening to the subject Vivienne had to broach.

"You have had a visitor, I see," said Valentine, taking one of the two chairs set beside the table, and with a glance at the liqueur stand and glasses.

"My darling Vivienne has only just left me. She found her room insufferably hot, and came down soon after you went away."

"I hope she found relief—she complained of headache."

"Entire relief. Do you know the change in her since you have been here is simply marvellous. A

month ago headache would confine her to her room for days in succession. A whole week would pass without my seeing the darling once. Now she is down every day, and her headache passes away in a few minutes. How can I ever repay you, my dear Val!" he added, bending forward and laying his hand affectionately on his nephew's arm.

"For what, sir?"

"For this marvellous change you have wrought in my darling Vivienne."

"Why, I've done absolutely nothing."

"Nothing consciously, maybe. But is there not some curative principle beyond the exhibition of drugs? May not the exuberant health of one flow into the undercharged system of another—the overflow of an electric current into the storage cell of er—er——? It sounds chimerical, I am aware; but every new idea must at first shock us by its incongruity with fixed conceptions. I don't know when this notion first dawned upon me, but it has grown now to positive conviction."

"Messmer, I believe, had some such theory," said Valentine, with a laugh. "I can only hope that any influence for good that I have had may be retained——"

"Prolonged is the better word, my boy," the old man said gently. He was a stickler for proper expression.

"Prolonged after my departure."

"Departure? You must not think of such a thing; especially at this moment, when I have most urgent need of your help."

"In what way, sir?"

Rawton shot out his thin old arms, drew himself up, and pulled the lappets of his coat together in preparation for a mighty diplomatic effort, and said—

"I propose nothing less than an entire change in the scheme of domestic management here, Val. You know that the east wing has been closed for a hundred years past? Well, I intend to have it renovated from top to bottom, and furnished completely in the most modern style."

"With what purpose?"

"For my own exclusive use, for the purpose of study and seclusion. I must have a suite of rooms entirely to myself and free from interruption, where I shall be out of everybody's way, in fact, except at such stated intervals as dinner and after, for instance, when I may enjoy the society of those I most love. Now if you would advise me with regard to these alterations in the east wing——"

"My dear uncle, the most ordinary architect and upholsterer would advise you a thousand times better than I; and Vivienne better than any one."

"I wish it to be in accordance with your tastes, Val. Since it must sooner or later be yours, why should I do anything which you may after my death wish to alter? You see my meaning?"

Valentine nodded—the pathos of that old man's meaning silencing his tongue.

"As for the rest of the house, I intend to give it

over entirely to Vivienne, and— " (nervously) " and you. You see," he proceeded, with a tremor in his voice, " I am anticipating the natural order of events, and before going away I wish to get a glimpse of the happy conditions which I trust may prevail after. All that I possess must eventually be yours and Vivienne's—this house and estate goes to you, the rest to my darling child. I have but a few years to live, but why should I keep you out of the enjoyment of your fortune—why should I, like an old miser, stick to a possession which gives me no possible advantage? In that east wing, you know, I shall live happy as a king—you may regard me simply as a kind of paying guest. I want to look upon you, Val, my boy, as a son rather than an heir. Do you grasp the idea?"

Val nodded again, the pathos of Rawton's abnegation appealing yet more forcibly to his heart.

"Such an arrangement, sir, is only practicable under one condition," he said.

"Name it, my boy, name it," said the old man eagerly—the fruit of his diplomacy seeming to be within reach now. "Don't be afraid of startling me with an unforeseen idea—I like it. Don't fear to offend; for nothing you can suggest will. Be sure of that."

Valentine smiled; for the old fellow's fatuous schemes for bringing him and Vivienne together had been seen through from the beginning.

"Vivienne and I can only live together in this house under the conditions you indicate as man and wife."

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Rowton, with a futile attempt at astonishment.

"But before going any further with the matter it seems to me that we should consult Vivienne's inclinations and be quite assured that our marriage is possible."

"You are right, Val—there is great wisdom in that suggestion, and——"

"Speak to her to-morrow night as you have spoken to me, and the question of the east wing can be settled afterwards!"

Valentine knew that by to-morrow night he should either be free or tied irrevocably to Vivienne for the rest of his days.

* * * * *

Going up to his room slowly, his head bent in meditation, Valentine was unaware that Vivienne waited for him at the head of the stairs until almost at the last step she laid her hands upon his shoulders, awaking him from his reverie with a start.

She was wrapped in a diaphanous *saut-de-lit* of old rose *mouseline-de-soi*, her heavy black hair loosely knotted for the night, and in the mellow light of the shaded lamp she looked beautiful enough to tempt him from his purpose. Could he resist the pressure of her clinging hands that drew him towards her?

For a moment he stood within a hair's-breadth of his damnation; but as a silken fold of her dress touched his face the mortal peril flashed upon his conscience, and with the instinct of self-preservation he seized the hands insidiously sliding round his neck, drew them away, and stepping quickly to her level, held her from him at arm's length. And then he stood silent and motionless, breathing hard with tightened nostrils and pressed lips, passion and principle conflicting for the mastery of his soul, honour and reason striving to subdue impulse, and sober his senses intoxicated by colour, form, perfume, and every subtle art a mistress of her cult could employ.

"I could not sleep without one more good night, love," she murmured. "I have been waiting, waiting, waiting, and the minutes have seemed hours."

It had been all hurry and bustle in her dressing-room for the last half-hour to prepare her toilette for this occasion—Thérèse actually putting the finishing touch to Vivienne's hair on the landing as Valentine set his foot upon the stairs.

"I have been talking to your father," Valentine began.

"How kind of you!"

"The kindness is his. To-night it was pathetic in its generosity."

"Darling papa!—what can he have found to talk about?"

"A subject that can never tire him—you."

"So like you, love, to think so. Talking about me? How interesting! You must tell me all about it. Shall we come in here?"

She opened the door of her boudoir, and standing against the jamb, working the familiar trick once more with raised eyebrow, sly smile, and bitten under-lip—forming with Valentine a picture suggestive of the spider and the fly.

"No, not there," replied Valentine, gaining strength.

He glanced about him. Moonlight streamed through the open window of the oriel at the end of the passage, falling on the deep window-seat. It looked suitably cool and calm down there.

"Will you find it too chilly?" he asked.

"Nothing is too anything with you, love."

They walked to the embrasure. Valentine stood until she was safely seated, and then took the seat which formed an angle with hers—not without a significance obvious enough to Vivienne.

"Now, tell me what darling papa has been saying," she said cheerfully.

"He has offered to give up everything to us."

"Poor, poor papa!" in a tone of becoming emotion. "Do you know, love, I sometimes think he feels that he has but a little while to live. Oh, Valentine, what should I do without him?"

"I am your cousin," Valentine said somewhat feebly.

"My cousin!" she exclaimed with pretty surprise.

"You have almost made me forget that you are my cousin."

"I also have forgotten that, and still more what was due to you, Vivienne."

"Naughty Val! If I cannot scold you, you shall not scold yourself. And what did you say to papa's offer—did you accept?"

"I could not."

"Why?"

"Because we cannot share this house except in marriage."

"But you do intend to marry me, don't you, love?" she asked in innocent amazement.

There could be no paltering with the truth now. Valentine answered, with bent head, "No."

Vivienne sat looking at him in silence, like one thunderstruck, for a full minute. Then, without a word, she withdrew the hand she had slipped through his arm, and, raising both, buried her face in them and wept. At any rate there was a spasmodic movement of her bent shoulders and from time to time a convulsive choke and flutter; also she found her handkerchief and pressed it to her eyes—half an honest tear would have soaked the flimsy inches of cambric and lace, but it served her through the whole scene without becoming unpleasantly moist.

Valentine thought her heart must break, and his bitter remorse and poignant grief were full penalty for all his offence. He was not one of those who find

it easy to bear the sorrows of others. Her silent weeping wrung every fibre of his heart. And she kept it up, knowing it was her last chance, this appeal to that part of his nature which she had not yet reached. Indeed, she stirred the most affectionate depths of his being. Had he been only her cousin he would have put his arm round her, drawn her to his heart, and kissed away her sorrow. But he dared not do that, being her lover, and standing yet firm in his resolution to go no further. And so he sat still, watching her mock agony with an agony that was real, powerless to comfort her by word or act.

When she found weeping useless and the pretence becoming inartistic, she turned, and raising her drawn face and glistening eyelashes towards him, said faintly, yet passionately—

"Kiss me once again, Valentine—one last kiss, if it must be the last."

He kissed her. She flung her arms round his neck.

"Tell me how I have offended you—what I have done."

"Nothing, God knows, that I have not sought."

"Do not kill all hope—say you will marry me one day if I can win your love. I know who has taken my place in your heart, but say that if I mould and train myself to be like her, you will take me back. Give me this chance before you marry Miss Magister." She was not going to let him pass over to her in a hurry.

"I do not ask you to now revoke what you have said. Leave me to-morrow. Let this be our good-bye. But promise me you will see me again, before—before it is too late!"

He promised.

* * * * *

"Didn't you feel as though you could kill him?" asked Thérèse, setting her white teeth, when she and her mistress were discussing the affair.

"What good could it have done me to kill him, you little imbecile?" asked Lady Vivienne, with a laugh.

"But weren't you furious?" asked Thérèse.

"I have never shown anger, nor even ill-temper, to any one since I was a child, and I don't intend to do anything so stupid, till I am stupid," answered her mistress.

SCENE VII

A GREATER VILLAIN THAN EVER

In the spring Dudley St. John left Dartmoor decidedly the worse for twenty-one years of penal servitude. He had been a model prisoner, and at heart was a greater villain than ever. Any latent desire of the better sort that he might have had was gone with the possibility of regaining his lost position. Compulsory hard labour had increased his antipathy to work, hard living had heightened his zest for luxury; and his tastes and distastes were only to be gratified by dishonest means. His sole objection to those means was the possibility that before long they would lead him back again to Dartmoor.

He had a nasty shock at the railway-station. Going into the waiting-room and glancing round him furtively—the old habit of taking stock of things with no movement save that of his eyes had stuck to him—he caught sight of an ill-looking rascal surveying him suspiciously.

"That's a bad lot," said he to himself; "what's he staring at?" Then he perceived that he was looking

at himself in a mirror. He had not seen a looking-glass for nearly a quarter of a century. He took off his hat to make sure that it was really he. He had dark wavy hair, neatly cut, when he last saw himself; now the top of his head was bald, with a rugged fringe of grey hair (allowed to grow for the last month). He remembered himself with a dark moustache and clean-shaven chin; now a grizzly beard covered the lower part of his face.

Time had not improved his appearance.

The brutalizing influence of solitary confinement and surreptitious communication with ruffians of the working-gang was imprinted on his face.

He had a few pounds in his pocket when he reached Waterloo, and his first outlay was at a second-hand clothier's in York Road. There he left his prison-made clothes and provided himself with a fairly good and well-fitting suit of tweed, a Gladstone bag, and necessary articles to carry in it—the dealer having supplied other gentlemen from Dartmoor and stocking all that they required.

A barber next door but one trimmed his hair, shaved off his beard, and waxed his moustache. He looked at himself in a glass with satisfaction after that.

"Bli' me! I'm still a gentleman!" he said to himself, recognizing the moment after that he must drop this form of expression with his prison-made clothes.

He drove in a hansom to the Criterion and spent the rest of the day in a big debauch.

Telling up the cost next morning, he found he had a little over seven pounds left from the sum handed over to him on leaving prison. Prudence bade him seek a fresh supply before going in for more dissipation. The good old plan of every villain who has ever drawn tears from a woman had never been supplanted by a better in twenty years of speculation upon future ways and means, and, knowing the character of the woman he had cheated, he felt pretty sure she would have put by a good bit of money as a provision for his return. Indeed, he gave her credit for such unselfishness that it scarcely occurred to him that she might die.

He took the 1.30 train from Liverpool Street—it was fast, and had the additional advantage of a restaurant-car—and arrived in Cromeby about five. It was then too late to do good business at Rawton, so he put up at the best hotel in Cromeby and had another good feed, his appetite being still insatiable and his digestive powers—thanks to prison discipline—enormous. But after breakfast the following morning he hired a fly, and without wasting time in tedious inquiry, drove straight to Dr. Sturgess at Rawton.

An old man hoeing weeds from the path led him up to the first floor of the mill, which served as a dispensary. There he found the burly doctor in his shirt-sleeves, measuring a dose of physic and talking to three patients seated on a long bench before him.

Sturgess cast a glance at his visitor, and with a jerk of the head towards the bench, said—

"You can sit down at the end there. I'll attend to you in your turn." Then he handed the dose to the first patient, and continued the lecture.

"Drink that off. I've made it as nasty as I can; but you'll find it nastier next time, for I'll make you pay sixpence for it. Now go home and don't let me see you again for a month. I see what's the matter with you, Burster. If you didn't drink so much you wouldn't need so much physic. Out with it—there's a tongue! Go down to the Black Boys and look at it in the taproom glass till you feel ashamed of yourself. If you can't cure yourself of intemperance, how do you expect me to do it? Feel bad, do you? Well, you've got to learn that it costs more to get well than it does to make yourself sick. Down with eighteenpence, or not a drop of stuff shall you get from me."

"Only got fourpence?—well, go and earn the rest, and by that time you won't want any of my drugs. Well, Mrs. Judd, how's Polly? Doesn't want to get up and play? Doesn't complain? Hum!—I'll drive over and see her. Mind I find the windows open. If there's a whiff of bad air in the place I'll send her to the hospital, mind that! Don't leave her, and don't let her be bothered by any Scripture readers or other busybodies. As you go through the village buy the poor child a doll" (putting his hand in his pocket). "I saw some capital ones at the general shop there at a shilling apiece. You can keep the change for beef-tea. Off with you! And now what

do you want?" addressing Dudley, now left alone with him.

"I wish to have five minutes' private conversation with you, Dr. Sturgess," Dudley began, in his most authoritative tone.

"You are perfectly free to say what you please here."

"Perhaps you do not know who I am?"

"Oh yes, I do, unfortunately. You're name is Dudley St. John, and you came out of prison the day before yesterday."

St. John glanced nervously towards the open door.

"I know further," pursued Dr. Sturgess, stoppering a bottle and putting it on a shelf, "that you are the most unmitigated villain that ever escaped hanging through the misdirected mercy of a grandmotherly government."

"It is scarcely necessary, perhaps, to tell one of your amazing sagacity why I am here?"

"Only amazing stupidity would blind one to the object of every gaol-bird to rob with impunity if he can."

Finding sarcasm of no more avail than high-handed assumption, St. John changed his front and came at once to the point.

"Where's my wife?" he asked savagely.

"Where you can never reach her, thank God."

"You think I can't find out her hiding-place, do you?" asked St. John, with a sardonic grin.

"It is not possible. All that remains of her poor body lies in the Lutheran churchyard of St. Petersburg."

"You expect me to believe that she is dead, eh?"

"You may believe it or not, as you please," replied Sturgess.

"Well, I happen to know that it's a lie." Seeing that this made no impression whatever upon the doctor, he continued: "Six months ago I wrote to her, and my letter came back within a week, 'Not known' written across it. I wrote to her a month ago, and that letter did not come back. How's that?" with a triumphant sneer.

"Here's your letter," said Sturgess, taking it from a drawer, "addressed 'care of Dr. Sturgess.' I mean to take care of it;" and, putting it back, he turned the key on it.

That silenced the other for a minute; then he said, still affecting incredulity—

"I had a daughter; I suppose she is dead too?"

"Unfortunately she is not."

"Ah! where is she?"

"I don't intend to let you know."

"I may find out without your assistance."

"Possibly. Very little enquiry will prove to you that she was here a few months ago."

"Very good; then I shall hang about here till she comes again."

"I can't prevent you, unhappily. Only I will

warn the police in case you should omit to report yourself."

St. John looked murder.

"I'm not a child to be stabbed and strangled, and I am not afraid of you, murderer as you are," pursued the doctor. "I almost wish you would try your hand upon me; and I'll tell you why. I know the conditions under which your life penalty is remitted, and if you give me the slightest chance I'll have you thrust back into your cell with no further hope of escape, as sure as I live." He brought his fist down on the table with a thump that filled the place with the jingle of glass. That exhibition of animal strength did more than aught else to cow St. John.

"I suppose I have the right to see my own daughter," he said.

"Your daughter is of age, and beyond your control. You have no more right than any other rascal to molest or annoy her—and I'll see that you don't."

"She is bound to contribute to my support, if I am in want—— "

"She may give you enough to keep you from starvation; how much beyond that is a matter for her to decide, not you."

St. John pricked up his ears at this hint.

"How much is she prepared to offer me?" he asked.

"She does not know of your existence; but on behalf of her family I am prepared to give you amply sufficient to keep you out of gaol or workhouse."

"How much?"

"Two pounds a week—conditionally."

"What are your conditions?"

"That you leave England to-morrow for any part of the world south of the equator."

"Who's to pay my passage?"

"I."

"And what guarantee shall I have that when you've got me into some d——d hole in the Antipodes you won't leave me there to rot?"

"Any guarantee your ingenuity can suggest. An agent shall be empowered to pay you two pounds a week on your personal application; but the payment shall cease if you make any attempt to make your existence known to your daughter. The gift is made in the hope of inducing you to end your days decently, and to spare your daughter the shame and humiliation of knowing that she is related to such an infamous scoundrel as you are."

"How long will you give me to consider your offer?"

"Five minutes," replied the doctor, looking at his watch. "There's a paper with a shipping list; you can choose your own destination."

"What's the alternative?" asked St. John, taking up the paper.

"Going back to prison, I should say, within the space of a few weeks."

It took St. John less than five minutes to decide—secretly to risk the alternative.

"Here's a vessel leaves Southampton to-morrow night for Sydney. Is that far enough for you?"

"Yes, that will do."

"Then I'll go. Give me the passage-money. I must be off at once. First-class accommodation, mind, and all exes."

"You shall want for nothing; and to make sure you are perfectly comfortable, I'll take your berth myself, and see you off."

St. John's excitement abated instantly, and with it his eagerness to be off.

"There is no necessity to rush," said the doctor, with a significant twinkle of the eye at his own joke. "If we leave here in my trap at 7.15 to-morrow morning, we shall catch the express at eight."

"All right. I'll turn up in time," said St. John, smiling. But a fool could have seen through the lie.

SCENE VIII

DUDLEY ST. JOHN'S JOURNEY

Why should he exile himself and live in a half-baked place, only fit for niggers and navvies, for a miserable two quid a week? Dudley St. John asked himself. If that beast of a doctor offered a hundred a year on behalf of the family, it was clear that the family could be made to pay twice as much if handled smartly. And if they wanted so badly to get rid of him they would have to make it worth his while to go. Nothing but a golden gag should shut his mouth now that he had learned the value of silence. He thought himself pretty clever, that fat madman at the mill, but he had given the show away like a booby, and would soon learn that he was no good as a middle man.

To come at a clear perception of the situation, he worked the thing out pro and con in a dialogue with himself.

"Well, how do you stand now?"

"Better than I expected, by long chalks. An annuity is more than I should have screwed out of the wife had she lived."

"You think she is dead?"

"Sure. She wouldn't have chucked me."

"Two quid a week's not bad."

"Four quid's better."

"A bird in the hand's worth two in the bush."

"Rot! You'd never get two birds if you're content with one."

"But your birds have flown, and how are you going to get at 'em?"

"Hunt 'em up."

"Where? Isn't likely they've left their address behind them for your benefit."

"P'raps not. Find that out at the pub."

"Think they've gone down to Ceylon, where their plantation is?"

"Not probable, since I was free to go anywhere south of the equator, and Ceylon is only a few miles to the north. No; they can't be far off—south of Europe, probably."

"It's all right, I suppose; no danger to yourself in hunting them?"

"M—no. If they had any other man to take care of 'em, they wouldn't have put this fat doctor on the job. The wife talked of her father as an old man; and the mother as an old woman—twenty-one years ago. Old Magister is dead and buried, I should say. His wife very likely sold up the plantation at his death, and having a bit of go left in her—she can't be much over sixty now—came up into civilized parts

with her granddaughter for a change, and they are having a frisk round."

"And there's possibly a sweetheart or two frisking round your daughter, if she's as pretty as her mother was."

"So much the better for me. Grandmother Magister will have a double inducement to keep me out of sight, and must pay accordingly."

"It's a regular gold mine."

"It is, and I'll work it for all I'm worth."

"Well, first of all you've got to find out where these Magisters are hiding. How are you going to work?"

Just then Dudley St. John came to the village green. At the corner stood the post-office; at right angles with it the Black Boys Inn. That conjunction suggested a practical answer to the last query.

"That conceited old ass, Dr. Sturgess, flattering himself that he has finished the business, will certainly write at once to Mrs. Magister to let her know of his achievement. And being a suspicious sort of brute, he himself will bring his letter to the post that no accident may betray the address to me. I shall see him easily from this window of the pub; and if I can't get a sight of that letter after he has dropped it in the box, I'm a Dutchman."

He went to the Black Boys, and asked if he could have lunch.

"I've nothing in the house, sir, but bread and

cheese," said the landlady. "But I could send out for a chop or a steak; only that will take time."

Time was precisely what Mr. St. John wanted, so he bade her send out for the chop.

"Will you step into the parlour, sir?" asked the good woman, opening a door with a glimpse of flower-crammed window and backgarden beyond.

"I'm very comfortable here," replied St. John, seating himself on the taproom table, whence he could see the post-office, and all who passed along the road, over the gauze blind. "Let me have a glass of ale to begin with. . . . What time does your post go out?" he asked, when the landlady, having bustled off her maid to the butcher's, brought him the ale.

"Half-past one, sir, the collector calls for the letters going to London and them parts, sir."

St. John looked at his watch. It was now five minutes past one; if he had gauged the doctor's character rightly, he would come upon the scene within five and twenty minutes.

"Plenty of time," said he, and then began to pump the woman.

She knew Mrs. Magister and her granddaughter, Miss Magister.

"Oh, she has dropped my name, has she?" thought St. John.

They were the most pleasant ladies anywhere round. They lived at the Rectory, only they always went away to foreign parts in the winter, being quite

gentlefolks, and they were away now. But where she couldn't tell. Mrs. Magister was a dear old lady, free-handed and quite affable, although so wealthy. As for Miss Magister she was quite a beauty, and dressed like any princess. She didn't know that she was engaged, though she had heard that Mr. Biron was seen walking with her all alone at Elmerton, which was four miles off, and she hoped it was true, for a better match couldn't be, nor one more richly deserved, she being so nice and Mr. Biron next of kin to Lord Rawton, and heir to the title and estate.

This was glorious! Things were looking better and better every minute. Two pounds a week! Why, St. John wouldn't have sold his chances as they now stood for three times that amount. With the prospect of marrying her grandchild to the future Lord Rawton, Mother Magister could be brought to paying anything to conceal the fact that her grandchild was the daughter of a convicted murderer.

The tide of prosperity seemed at full flood when Dr. Sturgess trudged into sight, a letter in his hand. The doctor walked straight to the letter-box, dropped his letter in, paused to admire a narcissus in the garden in front of the post-office, then, with his hands in his pockets, trudged back the way he had come, with the confiding simplicity of an over-fed beast.

The landlady was now cooking in the kitchen. St. John strolled out into the road and, seeing the coast clear, crossed over to the post-office and went in.

"I want a letter that I've just dropped into the box by an oversight," he said to the postmistress.

"Very sorry, sir, but I can't let you have it now."

"Why?"

"Because it's against the rules and regulations."

"But if I tell you the name on the letter to prove that it is mine——"

"Don't make no difference, sir. I wouldn't do it for any one."

She looked suspiciously at St. John; he had the cunning look of an inspector, and this might be a trap laid by the authorities for her undoing.

"You may at least let me see if I have addressed the letter properly," he said, in a tone of irritation. "There can be no harm in that, and I am willing to pay you for your trouble."

"I don't want your money, but rules is rules, and regulations is regulations. However, I can't see any harm in it."

She took a key and reluctantly opened the box. She collected the letters and brought them out in her large red hand.

"That's it," said St. John, detecting a blue stamp amongst the red. He would have taken it, but that the postmistress kept it well under her strong thumb.

"I only want to see the address, I tell you," said he, viciously.

"Well, there it is for you to read," she retorted, firing up and thrusting out the letter, still firmly

grasped by the corner with the confirmed belief that this was another inspector's trick.

St. John would have given a fiver, short as he was, to know what was inside that letter; but the outside of it gave information of even greater value—

"*Mrs. Magister*,
"*Poste Restante*,
"*Menton, France.*"

That was the address he read on the envelope; and he flattered himself on the celerity with which he had discovered it. It augured well for the future. But he still itched to know what Dr. Sturgess had said to Mrs. Magister, though he could make a pretty shrewd guess at it. Doubtless the fatuous old ass had told how easily matters had been arranged with him; how, without haggling over price, he, St. John, had agreed to terms, and was to start the next morning for Australia, his lips sealed for ever. Still, there might be some hint as to the maximum amount they might be brought to pay. It might serve him, that knowledge, as a guide in his forthcoming negotiation with Mrs. Magister.

Was it impossible to get the letter even now? Not at all. Why should he not race the mail, and, presenting himself at the *guichet* of the Menton post-office, claim the letter before Mrs. Magister? Begad! the thing was worth attempting, at any rate.

The civil hostess of the Black Boys provided him with a vehicle, in which he drove over to Cromeby,

and he ran up to London in the very train that carried the letter from Dr. Sturgess.

His funds were now reduced to something under six pounds—scarcely enough to take him to the Riviera. But he still had his watch, which had lost nothing by hanging twenty-one years in a prison strong-room. He pawned it for five pounds. Also, knowing the formalities exacted by the French post-office, he had fifty cards printed with Mrs. Magister's name and Rawton address.

He crossed the Channel with the mail and stuck to it to Menton. He was first at the *guichet* when the English letters were distributed, and pushing forward one of the cards he had prepared, received the coveted letter in return. In a secluded corner of the Municipal Gardens, he seated himself under a gas-lamp for the quiet enjoyment of his prize, chuckling over the stultification of Dr. Sturgess. But as he read the grin faded from his face and his chin slowly dropped. For this is how the doctor wrote—

"Dear Granny,

"The scoundrel has turned up, and is to all appearances a more thorough-paced villain than ever. He accepts the terms you were unwise enough to offer; but I am altogether mistaken in the rascal's character if he has any intention of fulfilling the contract. We have only whetted his appetite for something more than two pounds a week. Brutes of his

kind are never satisfied, or they would never be the brutes they are. He will find you out and bleed you, if he can. I pray you take this advice: the moment he begins to trouble you, return to England. If he follows you I will set the police to stop him effectually and save you a clear hundred a year.

"JOHN STURGESS."

SCENE IX

"BESTED BY A GAL."

Reading the letter, Dudley St. John felt bitterly disappointed and outrageously ill-used. He had pawned his watch and come down to the South of France, only to find that he would have done better to keep the watch in his pocket and stop at home. He had refused an annuity of two pounds a week, and now stood in a fair way to get nothing. The fair prospect of blackmailing his mother-in-law was obliterated by the promise of being himself persecuted by the police. And this letter clearly proved that Dr. Sturgess held the whip hand and meant to use it rigorously. His was no idle threat to be disregarded, but a settled purpose which commanded respect. St. John might have cursed himself, but that the doctor's meddling interposition called for every blasphemous execration that rose to his villainous imagination.

One crumb of comfort remained to feed his dying hopes—the warning had not fallen into Mrs. Magister's hands, and by a quick decisive blow he might yet retrieve his position and mulct the old woman before she

could communicate with the doctor and be advised by him. No time was to be lost.

Procuring a visitors' list, he found that Mrs. and Miss Magister were staying at the Hôtel Royal. It was now eight o'clock. Probably they would be dining. That didn't matter; he would hang about till they came from the dining-room. But at the hotel he learnt that Mrs. and Miss Magister had dined early and gone to Monte Carlo, where Bizet's *Pêcheur des Perles* was to be played. Nothing now seemed to fit in nicely.

In the hope of catching them on their return, he posted himself at the front entrance of the hotel about eleven. Shortly before twelve, carriages from the railway-station rattled down the deserted echoing street. Two or three pulled up at the Royal. In one there was an old gentleman and an old lady and two young ones. One young lady was strikingly handsome, she might have been French or Italian; the other was as noticeably pretty, and was undoubtedly English. The old gentleman stepped down, and courteously gave his hand to the elderly lady. Then there was laughter, and the handsome girl kissed the pretty one affectionately, and the latter, giving her hand to the gallant old gentleman, stepped down. After that the old gentleman took his seat beside the handsome girl, and they rattled away from the hotel.

No name had been mentioned to give him a clue, but Dudley felt tolerably certain that the old and young lady entering the Royal were his quarry. He

couldn't tackle them reasonably in the vestibule; but when he had allowed them sufficient time to get to their rooms, he sent up a short note prepared for the occasion.

"Mr. Dudley St. John is below, and wishes to see you privately and immediately upon a matter of the utmost urgency." Thus ran his note.

The manager returned in a few minutes with the note he had sent up. Across it was written—

"Mrs. Magister can see no one to-night on any matter whatsoever."

Here was another facer. However, the business could be done to-morrow, and in the mean time reason, backed by fear, might prepare Mrs. Magister to agree more quickly to reasonable terms.

At ten o'clock the next morning, Dudley once more called at the hotel and asked to see Mrs. Magister. Mrs. and Miss Magister had left at nine, to catch the Paris express. The uses of electricity had developed considerably in the last twenty years, and Dudley had overlooked the possibility of Dr. Sturgess repeating the warning contained in his letter when he (Dudley) had failed to keep his promise, and so put the thoughtful doctor's suspicions on the right track.

"Mrs. Magister is gone?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Did you say that Mrs. Magister is gone?" echoed a voice at his shoulder.

He turned and found the speaker to be the handsome

young lady he had seen overnight with his mother-in-law and his daughter. He looked her up and down with the eye of a connoisseur, taking stock of her rich dress not less than her personal beauty. The hall-porter explained Mrs. Magister's sudden departure—a telegram had arrived for her while she was at Monte Carlo in the evening. That opened Dudley's eyes.

"Has no letter been left for us?" she asked.

"What name, madame?"

"The Lady Vivienne Biron, or Lord Rawton."

"Yes, madame, there are letters for both, if they are not already sent up to your hotel." The hall-porter went off briskly to make inquiry; Vivienne remaining with a mystified expression in her long speculative eyes.

Dudley St. John also kept stationary—surveying the handsome girl with increasing curiosity. He had heard from the garrulous landlady of the Black Boys that Lord Rawton and his daughter, Lady Vivienne, had spent some summer months at the Hall. This, then, was she—the child he had attempted to murder, grown to womanhood—the indirect cause of his misfortunes, as he chose to think.

"It is unaccountable!" exclaimed Vivienne, taking the letters fetched by the hall-porter. Dudley gave a low laugh, if that may be called a laugh, which had rather exasperation than mirth in it. Vivienne turned upon him inquiringly.

"You may be able to explain," she said.

"I might," he muttered savagely, "if it were worth my while," and, turning to the attendant, he added, "Send me an absinthe in the garden." Then he sauntered down the steps and sank with a curse into a chair under the palms.

The waiter who brought him the absinthe thought he must certainly have lost everything at Monte Carlo by the look of him, and hung about for payment and his tip, under the apprehension that when he had finished his drink the ruined gambler might blow his brains out.

The wretch had not the courage for that; otherwise his desperate condition might have led him to shorten the hopeless days before him. He had journeyed down like a prince, making so sure of a successful issue to his venture, and now he had scarcely enough to carry him back to England. And how was he to live there without running into the arms of the police, now surely warned by that damned doctor?

Lady Vivienne glanced at her letter. It was from Midge—a few hurried lines to say that Granny had received a telegram from Dr. Sturgess which compelled her to return at once to Rawton, as it concerned some business transactions which—the rest was not worth reading, and Vivienne, folding it, slowly put it back in the envelope. Was that the true explanation or were they lying? she asked herself. Was this "business" a pretext on the part of that meddling doctor to bring Valentine and Midge together? Were they in a

conspiracy to trick her? Prone as she was to attribute her own vices to other people, Vivienne did not believe that Midge was clandestinely corresponding with her cousin or playing a double game of any kind. She was too much of a fool for that. But why had they gone off in such a wonderful hurry?

Her calculating eye fell upon the man under the palms.

What had he to do with the affair? There should be some connection between his evident chagrin and the sudden departure of the Magisters. He knew why they were gone. The brutal laugh and coarse intimation that betrayed his character and stamped him as a person of "no class," despite his gentlemanly appearance, showed that he held some secret about the two ladies. What it was she determined to find out, and leaving the hotel by the back entrance, she descended the steps and seated herself quietly on a chair within a yard of him. There was nothing but the dull apathy of despair in his eyes, as he raised them from the ground to see who the devil had the cheek to sit unasked at the same table with him.

Should she employ her arts of fascination upon this seemingly well-to-do man, or offer him a price for his secret—treat him as an equal or as a lacquey? She decided upon the latter course the moment she detected his utter dejection.

"May I ask what you meant by what you said just now?" she asked.

"Don't know what I did say," he replied, taking a gulp of absinthe.

"You said you could explain why Mrs. Magister and her granddaughter had left so suddenly—if it were worth your while."

A faint gleam of cupidity lit up Dudley's dull eyes.

"So I could."

"What would make it worth your while?"

He drew himself together, and "weighed her up" mentally in silence. There was cunning as well as cupidity in his furtive eyes now. He glanced round to assure himself that there were no eavesdroppers. There was absolutely no one now but they in the garden. Had he known Vivienne better he might have spared himself any apprehension on that score. Thrusting his hands in his pockets, and turning over the few remaining coins there, he said craftily—

"That depends on how much you want to know."

"Don't you think we had better play with the cards on the table?" she asked. "I mean this: There is a mystery about Miss Magister and her movements, which I will pay well to unravel."

"You are her friend. I saw you together last night."

"You may have seen me kiss her, heard me call her 'darling'—well, are those always signs of love between women—are they anything but a conventional mask for an opposite sentiment, when both love the same man? I say again, I will pay well to know all

about 'my friend,' especially as I believe something to her discredit is concealed. You see," she pursued, "I can afford to be perfectly frank with you. The difference in our position prevents your saying anything to my disadvantage which could possibly be believed."

"How do you know there is any difference in our position?" he asked sullenly.

"My father is Lord Rawton; you don't suppose me fool enough to think for one moment that you are a gentleman?"

He shrugged his shoulders and glanced on the ground, remembering, perhaps, that at one time this would have been an affront, before all pride and self-respect had been knocked out of him at Dartmoor.

"On the other hand," she continued, "you have nothing to fear by being candid with me."

"Something to her discredit *is* concealed," said Dudley, after a reflective pause. Lady Vivienne waited for him to continue, patiently. "Mrs. Magister is her grandmother." He glanced at her cunningly from the corner of his eye. She nodded, and waited in silence. "Did you ever hear that Mrs. Magister had a son?" he asked, with the same cunning leer.

"It is probable, since the grandchild bears her name."

"Did you ever hear that she had a daughter?"

"Never."

"Well, she had no son, but she had a daughter, and that daughter was my wife."

Lady Vivienne raised her eyebrows—it might have been interrogatively.

Surprise, curiosity, and eager excitement were all admirably concealed. Not a muscle of her face changed its expression of cool indifference as she asked—

"And who are you?"

"That is a secret which they will pay me a hundred a year to conceal."

"And are you willing to sell it to me?"

"For a price."

"How much?"

"Something more than they are prepared to pay."

"Supposing I agree——"

"Why, then," said Dudley, with a grin of satisfaction in turning the tables upon her, "the difference in our station will compel me to demand a signed agreement that you may not repudiate the debt when you have the secret."

"Sign an agreement that would place me absolutely at the mercy of such a person as you?" she said, with superb contempt. "No, thank you!"

"As you like," said he, rising and turning his back on her with an assumption of her indifference. He took a step, then, in the hope of compromise, turned back and threw a franc on the table beside his glass.

The slightest indication of a laugh made him raise his eyes savagely to Vivienne. Leaning back in her chair, rocking one little foot to and fro beneath her lace skirt, she was surveying him with insolent effrontery.

"I wish I had stuck the knife through your heart!" he said to himself in a rage.

She saw that fury in his eyes, and as if in pity of his discomfiture she opened her purse, took out a note, and dropped it on the table before him.

"I think I owe you that," she said.

He snatched it up greedily.

"A hundred francs—about four quid," said he. "Don't you want to know anything else, then?"

"Nothing that an ordinary inquiry agent will not procure me for a few sovereigns—now you have put me on the scent."

"Bested by a gal!" he muttered, going off half mad with exasperation. "Lady Vivienne—Lady Judas!"

And by that name she stood in his mind to the end.

SCENE X

AN ENTERTAINING CONFESSION

Having money in his pocket, and being within ten minutes' run of Monte Carlo, Dudley St. John seated himself that evening at one of the roulette tables in the Casino. A gambler, born and bred as he was, could not do otherwise.

Of course he had a system—the best and simplest in existence; and this was to follow the play of the most fortunate gamester at the table. A jovial buxom woman, with good luck printed on her cheerful face, was winning in an extraordinary manner, and to the disgust of every player with a system at the table, for she seemed guided by sheer caprice, in defiance of all logical probabilities. Dudley wedged his way to the back of her chair and set to work, cautiously playing only one five-franc piece at a time. Wherever that woman placed her money he set his piece, and in the majority of coups won. When the rooms closed, he found himself in possession of nearly twenty-five pounds, all told. He saw himself on the royal road to fortune at last; and once more thought scorn-

fully of that modest annuity offered him by Dr. Sturgess. Bury himself in a dead-alive Colony! why on earth should he—when going only at the present rate he could live like a lord in one of the pleasant resorts of civilization, merely by amusing himself for a few hours each day?

But he didn't intend to go simply at the present rate. Insatiable greed discontented him with small gains. Nothing can satisfy a covetous spirit. Why should he punt at roulette for silver when he could plunge for gold in the next room? why stick at roulette for a few pounds a day, when the same system worked at Trente et Quarante would bring in four times as much?

So the next afternoon he went straight to the Grande Salle, disgusted with the rattle of the ivory balls and the chink of silver as he passed through the roulette rooms. The silence of the Grande Salle was distinctly soothing; the scent of the women was better; the blaze of diamonds sharpened his lust for possession.

He picked out the most crowded table, and glanced round for the biggest pile of notes and gold on the table. A thin, delicate old gentleman was methodically massing a respectable fortune before him—notes for 1000 francs in one pile, for 500 francs in the next, and for 100 in a third place, with rows of fat five-louis gold pieces ranged in systematic order. Decidedly no pile on the table equalled that. He himself did not play; his time was wholly occupied in arranging the

winnings pushed before him and supplying the stakes demanded by the player on his right hand. That player was his daughter—the most gorgeously dressed and handsomest young woman at the table.

"Lady Judas, begad!" was the mental ejaculation of Dudley St. John, as he recognized her, and he threw down a louis beside her stake without a moment's hesitation.

For some time he won, Lady Vivienne following a "ziz-zag." His hand grew cold and clammy, his fingers shook with excitement and growing triumph as he took up notes and gold. Then a "run" followed the "ziz-zag," and Lady Vivienne began to martingale on couleur. St. John should have stopped then; he was nearly a hundred pounds to the good. That's a very fair sum to leave off with, but a very poor capital to martingale upon. He knew that perfectly well; but unconquerable avarice led him on against his better judgment. Planking but one louis where Vivienne put ten, ten where she put a hundred, and a hundred where she put a thousand, he nevertheless came to the end of his tether at the seventh coup, and that was again "inverse." Vivienne doubled her stake with imperturbable calm—the pile under her father's hand scarcely showing her loss; but Dudley St. John had not a single gold piece left to put on the coup. And the eighth coup made couleur a winner! With another note to venture, St. John would have won back more than

all he had lost; for lack of that note he was ruined. Not one despised piece of five francs remained to give a chance of recovery at roulette. He must return to the old perilous practice to get enough for a dinner and a bed. Thousands of pounds lay strewn about within his reach. Fortunes glittered on the women's arms and necks. A hundred more or less would scarcely be noticed by any of these colossal players. Yet he dared not snatch a single louis. Detectives, he knew, were scattered thickly in the crowd, set by the scrupulous bank to watch over the interests of its clients; to jealously guard the plunder for itself. Instinctively St. John had spotted several of these police agents, and they as surely had their eyes on him. Fox was written in his face; dog in theirs.

Satisfied with her afternoon's experience, Vivienne stopped play. Rawton called an attendant, changed his bullion and small notes for larger notes, which he carefully transferred to a case and put in his breast-pocket; then they left the rooms. St. John saw them again in the vestibule, the old man placing a wrap on Vivienne's shoulders and fussing about her with tender solicitude. He followed them out of the Casino, not with any special purpose, but as a jackal follows tigers, in the hope of some neglected surplus of their prey falling in his way.

They consulted a moment or two on the steps, then crossed the road and took a table under the verandah of the Cafe de Paris. A franc and a few sous were left

to St. John; he took a seat also and called for a bock—still keeping within earshot of Rawton and his daughter, under the spell of covetous speculation.

"Lady Judas" presently saw him—very little escaping her observation at any time, yet seeming to take no more notice of him than if she had never seen him before. But soon after, with the sweetest smile of entreaty, she sent Rawton off on an errand, and then, turning to St. John, she invited him by a gesture to come to her. He was by her side in a minute, humble enough, and hat in hand.

She motioned him to come and take her father's chair, and when he was seated, asked carelessly—

"Why have you followed me?"

"I don't quite know," he answered, disconcerted by the directness of her question; "but it struck me just now that I could let you know all that you are likely to learn from an inquiry agent for the price you would pay him."

"I should not think of paying him more than"—a moment's calculation—"twenty pounds, at the outside."

"Done!" said he, with a vision of the roulette table before him and the possibility of recouping himself at it by careful play and the fixed determination of every fool never to make a fool of himself again. Vivienne leaned back in her chair, he bent forward, resting his arms on the table, that his lowered voice might reach her. "I'll answer every question you may

put to me for the money. Now then, what do you want to know?"

"Your name to begin with."

"Dudley St. John—straight."

"Not a bad name; and what are you?"

He glanced furtively right and left, and dropping his voice yet lower, answered—

"Murderer."

"A murderer. How interesting. Who did you murder?"

"A policeman."

"Wasn't that very stupid on your part?"

He nodded acquiescence.

"You were caught, of course? Men who murder policemen invariably are."

He nodded again.

"You were tried for it and found guilty?"

"Sentenced for life," with another nod.

"How long have you been out of prison?"

"A week."

"What possessed you to murder a policeman?"

"Thought he was collaring me for another murder."

"Oh, you murdered some one before that?"

"No, I didn't, as it happened; but I thought I had."

"This is quite exciting," she said languidly, with nothing but absolute apathy in her expression. "And who was the other?"

"You."

"Indeed, you surprise me," with the same unruffled calm.

"Of course, you can't remember it," he pursued. "You were a kid twenty-one years ago, you know. My wife, Mrs. Magister's daughter, was your nurse. It was a love-match"—(with a sickly semblance of a grin)—"and as her people wouldn't help me, or forgive her, she had to earn her living. That's how she came to be your nurse."

"Positively romantic. Go on."

"I had got into Rawton Hall to see her. You were lying covered up on the bed. Well, something happened to exasperate me, and, having a knife open in my hand, I stuck it into you—fool like. Wished I hadn't the moment I'd done it. Don't know where I stuck you—had to slope off sharp. But I knew I had stuck you, because I found my shirt-cuff stained with your blood, and had to cut it off and bury it, as the mark wouldn't wash out."

She looked at him with half-closed speculative eyes, unmoved by his narrative, and then said—

"Then I really am indebted to you for this?" laying her hand lightly on her hip.

He nodded.

"It's an odd way of earning twenty pounds, isn't it?" she asked.

He shrugged a response.

"One thing strikes me as being rather curious in the affair," she added.

"What's that?"

"My father has never explained how I came by my scar, though I have certainly questioned him."

"Perhaps he didn't know; your mother was dying at the time, and very likely he thought more of her than of you at that time. Besides, my wife would naturally try to keep him in the dark, for my sake."

"Where is your wife?"

"Dead and buried in St. Petersburg. She turned up her toes same year I went into the jug—twenty-one years ago."

"And your child was then sent to her grandmother, Mrs. Magister?"

"Yes, I suppose so, seeing they're together now; and the wife had no other relative in England."

"Then no one probably knows of this affair but you?"

"No one, except——"

"Except——" she echoed.

"Well, there's an old madman at Rawton."

"Dr. Sturgess?"

St. John nodded.

"You see, he was in the Hall at the time, and the wife finding you stabbed and choked as I left you, would certainly call to him for help."

"And why didn't he tell my father?"

"Because it would have put him in a beastly awkward position, as he had got my wife to nurse you. Besides that, he was awfully sawney about Madge, and

would keep the thing dark for her sake. If that affair had come up at my trial I should have been scragged to a certainty."

She acquiesced in this view with a series of little nods, glancing down at her toe, which never ceased its rhythmical sway under the lace of her skirt. When she lifted her eyes to St. John's face they were narrowed, in the manner of one getting the perspective of a picture. They revealed absolutely nothing to him of her secret thoughts.

She regarded him for some moments in silence; then she opened her purse.

"I really should not have supposed you could be so entertaining," she said, taking out a note for 1000 francs—twice the sum she had offered to pay him. "Please take this. Never mind about the change."

"Thanks, awfully!" he exclaimed, moved to momentary gratitude by her unexpected generosity. "There isn't anything else you want to know?"

"M—no,"—reflectively.

"Nothing in the world I can do for you?"—prospective benefit coloured gratitude largely.

"Not at present. . . . If you should lose your money and find yourself again in difficulties, you may write to me. I am still a little perplexed by my father's silence. Here he is—don't move."

She greeted Rawton with an angelic smile, as he came up the terrace with the feather boa she had sent him for.

"So sweet of you, darling!" she murmured, taking the boa. "Here is a gentleman who wishes to be introduced to you—Mr. Dudley St. John."

She spoke very distinctly and leaned back in her chair to watch the effect of the name upon her father.

"St. John—St. John?" echoed the old gentleman, after a courteous salutation. "I knew a St. John in the seventies—attaché at Berlin, I believe."

"Yes, my lord; I am his son," stammered Dudley.

Lady Vivienne smiled and rose, seeing that he was likely to flounder. Rawton hastened to arrange her boa and pick up her sunshade.

"My dear," said he, "have we any engagement this evening?"

"Yes, darling," she replied, evidently not desirous of inviting Dudley to their table—"Good afternoon, Mr. St. John."

ACT II

SCENE I

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

Few observers would have credited Lady Vivienne with sentimental folly; Rawton himself would not have deemed his daughter capable of extravagant infatuation; even a philosopher alive to the inconsistency of human nature and aware of the incongruous elements that constitute character would have doubted if weak sensibility had any place in her heart. Yet over Valentine's letters she was as silly as any love-sick schoolgirl. She kissed them, read them and re-read them until she knew every word they contained by heart, slept with them under her pillow. Yet there was nothing in them to encourage hope, little enough to foster any illusion.

There were just six of them, one for each month of their separation, and all written in answer to hers. The first two or three were stiff and constrained with the studied endeavour to avoid misconception without giving pain; the latter ones were easier and more sympathetic as the strain was removed and a more natural and cousinly feeling prevailed. But there was nothing

more than genial kindness in the best of them. It was due to Vivienne's tact that he wrote at all. She wrote to him as a dear friend, and it was impossible with any decency to refrain from responding in a like spirit. And the correspondence once begun, she gave him no opportunity of breaking it off by any passionate outburst or betrayal of her feelings. She was careful to say nothing which could alarm him or check the growth of an affectionate regard which might be hazardous to his freedom. She referred neither to the past nor to the future. Past experience showed her that she must go on a different tack to make him marry her. A lover may be won in five minutes; but a husband is only to be got by a slower process. Men had been glad to slip the most costly rings on her fingers, but not one had ever suggested giving her that plain gold affair which may be bought for a few shillings.

And she resolved more firmly than ever to make him marry her. She loved him as she had truly loved no other man, and she loved him the more as he seemed to be falling away from her. A certain kind of illegitimacy sharpened her passion. She had thought for days of a man passing swiftly in a carriage, a momentary glance their only communication; introduced to the same man under normal conditions, she would have found his society tiresome in an hour. If Valentine had not given his heart to another she might not have troubled herself for its possession; but envy and jealousy quickened her desire, and covetous disposition

burned with the desire to regain her hold upon the man and secure him to herself. And now it was made clear to her by St. John's revelation that something more than the gratification of passion was involved in marriage with her cousin; her material interests depended upon it to an alarming degree.

Could she make Valentine marry her? She believed it possible, now that she knew his nature better. Midge was the chief obstacle. If she could be struck out of the running, Vivienne's chance of winning would be all to nothing against any other woman in Valentine's limited circle of acquaintances. If he and Midge came together, and were allowed a free hand, they would marry; but if they could be kept apart, Midge would be wooed and won by somebody else, and Valentine would forget his infatuation of a day. Vivienne had seen this from the beginning, and done her best to mould circumstances to her purpose. She had inspired Rawton with the sparkling idea of going South for the winter, had piloted him in the same course with the Magisters, and had made Midge her very dearest friend and inseparable companion. Valentine could not possibly make love to Midge before her face. And insidiously she had led the girl to believe that she and her cousin were lovers and would eventually marry—when Valentine's book was written. That belief was another barrier between him and Midge. With maybe a secret tear or two she abandoned all hope of being more than a friend to Valentine. To think of him as

a possible lover was an impossible treachery to one of her honest nature.

But the sudden departure of the Magisters had struck Vivienne with alarm, and rendered new precautions necessary. In his last letter Valentine thought his volume would be finished towards the end of April, and promised himself a great feast of fresh air and freedom as compensation for six months of close confinement in Bloomsbury. Vivienne conjectured that his steps would turn at once to Rawton, and she pictured him (with great injustice), making the same use of his freedom at the Rectory that he made at the Hall. By making immediate arrangements for the preparation of the Hall, she might return to Rawton in time to prevent a catastrophe; but supposing Valentine finished his work earlier than he expected, and arrived at Rawton a few days in advance of her return, her scheme might be irretrievably upset. Something must be done at once.

St. John had put a weapon in her hand which might be turned against her lover and her friend with deadly effect. An anonymous letter to Midge, telling her that her father was a convicted murderer, would do the business at once. She could not marry the future Lord Rawton under a false name, and with the knowledge that her father was a convicted murderer. But she feared to employ the dastardly means—not because they were dastardly or that she dreaded discovery, but because she knew her card, strong as it was, would

be over-trumped by Dr. Sturgess if she dared to play it.

So keeping back that high card, and playing for safety, she hurried on her arrangements for returning to the Hall.

"I don't know whether it is to hunt for the violets and primroses you talk so sweetly about, or the dearer wish to see my darling Midge again, but I am crazy to get back to dear Rawton," she wrote to her friend. Also she sent Thérèse in advance to prepare the way.

* * * * *

Valentine in an easy-chair, his slippered feet on the fender and a pipe in his mouth, was thinking out to-morrow's work when somebody rapped at the door.

"Come in!" he cried, and, looking over his shoulder, he perceived a young woman with a light wooden box in her hand in the doorway.

"Thérèse!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet; "what on earth has brought you here?"

She closed the door, flung her box on the table, and ran towards him with extended hands and supplication in her pretty face. But if she expected him to take all the advantages offered she was vastly mistaken. Valentine in collar with a dear honest girl enshrined in his heart was very different to Valentine out of collar with no restraining influence who had kissed her at their first meeting. He first stuck his hands in his pockets and took a longer pull at his pipe; then he said firmly, but not harshly—

"Sit down and tell me all about it. Why, it's half-past eleven."

"Speak French; I don't understand a word of this barbarous English," she said, but she took the armchair all the same, and quickly recovering her equanimity told him how the boat had been delayed in the Channel by a horrible fog; how knowing no hotel and fearing all sorts of things, she had come on to him in a cab, her mistress having told her to deliver that box of flowers before they faded, and how she was nearly dead with exhaustion and hunger.

"I don't know what I can offer you," said Valentine, opening a cupboard and seeking about amongst his provisions. "You see I don't feed in my chambers. Oh, here's some biscuits though, and I know I have some sherry somewhere."

Thérèse adored sherry and biscuits, and indeed it was pretty to see her white teeth cracking the cakes and her red lips pouting at the glass.

"But what in the world am I to do with you?" asked Valentine presently, looking again at his watch.

"It's precious late to go to an hotel."

"And they wouldn't take me in without luggage. Haven't you any room besides this?"

"Only one," nodding towards his chamber.

"Well, two rooms are enough for two people," she observed, with a sly smile. "I can sit here quite well, all night, if you like."

"Oh no, that won't do! You must be fagged

out. You can go in there. I can do well enough here."

"Monsieur commands," said she, accepting the kindly offer with a grace a duchess might have envied.

She talked about Paris, where she had been staying with her mistress for the last few days, and about Vivienne, who was so anxious to come back to England that she had sent her on to hurry the people who were preparing the Hall. Then, having finished her light supper, she rose.

"Now I will go, if you permit," with her head on one side and the sly look in the corner of her eyes. "Will you show me the way?"

Valentine opened the door.

"The gas is alight. Make yourself as comfortable as you can," he said, sticking to his pipe and keeping his hands in his pockets. "Good night."

Returning, Valentine sat in his armchair a few minutes. Then he rose suddenly, kicked off his slippers, pulled on his boots, and, closing the door behind him, went out to seek a night's lodging elsewhere.

And if he thought of any woman when he closed his eyes, it was of honest little Midge.

SCENE II

LORD RAWTON'S AFFAIRS

The last page sent off to the publisher, Valentine felt once more the schoolboy's exultant sense of freedom regained. With a light valise, and a still lighter heart, he rattled off to the railway-station en route for Rawton. Writing from the Hall, Vivienne said in her last letter—

"I am very anxious about my darling father. He grows more and more feeble in body and mind. Dr. Sturgess, who is really at heart a most kind man, and, I believe, a reliable adviser, thinks there is no immediate danger; but we cannot dissuade my poor father from the unhappy idea that he will shortly die" (here the words were blotted, as if a tear had fallen on the page). "Every morning he asks for you. Oh, if you could bring back life to him, as you did to me!"

Something of duty then lay in this journey; but more of yearning, and Midge held the larger place in his joyful anticipation.

He had given no intimation of his coming, so there was no one to meet him at Cromeby. He wanted

a free run over the glorious heath before meeting Vivienne; that was significant.

Leaving his traps at the station, he went down to the cycle store to hire a wheel. He selected a machine that looked like the one he rode when he met Midge. That had brought him luck then; why should it not now? It was just possible he might meet her between Cromeby and Rawton, and there was a hope in every turn of the road, every dip of the land, that he might discern a fair girl on a cycle. He walked up Stratton Hill to spin out the time, and coming to the crest caught sight of a pony-carriage down in the hollow. There seemed to be two ladies in it—could it be Midge and her Granny? One figure bright and light even at that distance favoured the notion.

Down the hill he flew, hope gradually heightening to quick pulsating conviction. It was Midge and Granny!

He slowed down as he approached, a mist coming before his eyes, as if the vision of pink and white had dazzled them. In a couple of minutes now they would meet, and he would have that dear little hand in his, look into her twinkling eyes, and see the dimples in her smiling cheek, with Granny beyond in her buxom good humour. He was prepared to spring from his machine when his heart seemed suddenly to stop. Midge, deadly white, was staring straight before her; Granny, with uncompromising severity, was looking him straight in the face. Midge must have seen him; why did she

avert her eyes? Why was her face so drawn and pale? He raised his hat; Mrs. Magister acknowledged the salutation with the slightest and most distant inclination of her head, never drawing rein. Midge cast not a single glance at him; and so they met and passed.

Valentine felt sick with the sudden revulsion of emotion; all the sunlight and joy of life was overcast in a moment. The shade of the park avenue chilled him to the bone.

Vivienne was out when he came to the Hall, but Rawton was in his study. He sat at his huge writing-table, which was covered from end to side with bundles of papers each tied up carefully with red tape, and he was groping for more in an open deed-box by his side, so engrossed in his search that he took no notice of Valentine's entrance, though the moment before he had called "Come in!" in answer to his knock. Putting a fresh pile of papers on the table, he settled his glasses on his nose and pored over them, oblivious of all else.

Valentine stood regarding the old man in silent pity, noting the transparency of his skin, and thin harassed face, the trembling fingers wandering aimlessly from heap to heap of docketted papers; then stepping forward he laid a hand upon the bent shoulder and said, in his pleasant low voice, "Uncle."

"My boy, my dear Valentine!" exclaimed Rawton, after regarding him for a minute in mute perplexity. "I remember you quite well. Thank God, you have come, and I pray it may not be too late!"

"Why, what's wrong, sir?" Valentine asked, drawing a chair to the table.

"Everything, Val. I am wrecked—morally, physically, materially. Utterly wrecked in every way."

"Let's tackle the difficulties one at a time. What's amiss morally?"

"My mind, Val, is giving way," replied the old man in a low voice. "My memory's gone; my mental faculties are all paralyzed. Look at these papers; I can't make them out. All is inexplicable confusion, and I can't see my way to bring them into order. The machinery is quite worn out, my boy. At one time, you know, I used to get a brilliant idea every five minutes. I used frequently to startle myself by the very originality of my conceptions. Now nothing comes —nothing."

"Well, now, what's wrong physically?"

"I can't eat, my boy, I can't sleep. I—that door's shut, isn't it; for I wouldn't have my dear child suspect what I am about to tell you for all the world"—(dropping his voice to a whisper). "I am dying," he began to whimper piteously. "I shall not live to arrange all this" (spreading his hands over the mass of papers). "And what is to become of my beloved Vivienne?"

"We will think of that presently. Now let us come to the material difficulty."

"Ruin, ruin, ruin!" groaned the poor old fellow. "I have made some investments that I can find no

trace of—like a miser, I have buried my money where I cannot find it. I was never a rich man, but there was always a sufficiency until this year, and now I find that every penny I can raise does not amount to two thousand pounds."

"Who is your financial agent?"

"I have none. I myself have always managed my affairs—balanced my books to a shilling—now I am out by nearly fifty thousand pounds—and, my dear Vivienne——"

"Come, sir, come—there's no occasion for such despair. An accountant will settle everything in a day or two."

"An accountant, Val, at two guineas a day—and my steward here wants five hundred for absolutely necessary repairs on the estate. That is yours, Val, and it shall come to you unencumbered. But I can't afford an accountant."

"I can. I know a capital man for the work—Jones is his name,"—he felt sure of finding an accountant of that name in the directory—"and you shall see what marvels he will work for a few guineas. First of all he will clear all these papers away, and show you exactly where your lost money is invested. Then you will be able to get a good dinner, and sleep like a top after it. And when you have eaten and slept, back will come your memory, with a whole train of brilliant ideas, and every faculty will be as vigorous as ever. You see all your difficulties form a single corollary, like those that

beset the little old woman with the pig who wouldn't go over a stile."

"Do you think so, Val; do you really believe that all will come right again?"

"Why haven't I told you so again and again, darling?" Vivienne spoke. She had entered the room silently as a cat, and now, standing behind Rawton's chair, slid her hands down his thin arms and pressed her cheek to his. Then, rising, she turned to Valentine, and holding out both hands, said significantly—

"Cousin."

There was no leering now, no wicked expression on lip or brow; she looked him steadfastly in the eyes, and the smile of welcome was tinged with gravity. She wished him to believe that she was a good girl, worthy of affection at last. And she had dressed herself—in the last quarter of an hour—with artistic taste for the part of a devoted daughter. Her costume was quite simple, and of a delicate shade of lavender. Valentine thought that she looked better, more human, and more beautiful than ever; and he grasped her hands in his with cordial warmth.

"It is so good to see you here again," she said; and then turning to her father, whose eyes were again wandering over the papers, "You will join us in the drawing-room when you have dressed, darling; or would you like tea to be served in the little room?"

"Wherever it pleases you, love," replied the old man, rising at once. "Yes, I must get into some

decent clothes, of course. You must excuse me, Val, I didn't know you were coming." (He was in his dressing-gown, though it was four o'clock.) "Where's my fellow?"

"I'm your fellow, darling," said Vivienne, smiling; "lean as heavily as you please on my arm; I've strength enough for both."

Her tenderness for the old man was quite touching. Their rôles were reversed; it was she who now was all consideration for his slightest wants, repaying the tenderness he had lavished on her. And Valentine was duly impressed.

Leaving Rawton to his man, the cousins passed into the drawing-room.

"By the way, have you lunched?" Vivienne asked, stopping short at the door.

"Oh yes. I managed that in the train. But I shall be glad if you will send over to the station for my bags before dinner hour. I wheeled from Cromeby."

"Then you are not going to run away from us directly?"

"I hope not. Why should I?"

"We are very dull here, Val."

"The more reason for staying, if I can possibly make things more cheerful."

"You seem to have begun already," she replied, with brighter expression.

The couch and cushions were there in the half light;

but she seated herself on the stiffest little chair quite close to a window.

"That reminds me that I ought to look up a directory, and write a little, while my uncle is out of his study—I promised I would send for an accountant."

"I heard you," she said gravely, and then after a moment's thoughtful pause, "Do you think that it is quite advisable, Val?"

"His affairs seem in an awful muddle, and that chaos of papers——"

"There are some that date back thirty years—quite useless."

"An accountant would soon clear them out of the way."

"Scarcely without worrying my father. That would lead to endless discussion, confusing his poor mind still more, and fixing his thoughts on that we wish him to forget."

"Have you anything better to suggest?"

"His latest anxiety is about repairs needed on the estate. If we could fix his attention upon them only for a few days, I am sure he would forget the other subject. And you could do so much——"

"I see, make him think I am looking after my own interests in the estate—get him to go round the farms with me and look into the matter personally—why, the fresh air alone will clear his faculties. Splendid notion! Who could have thought you so practical, Vivienne?" he added, with frank admiration.

"You see, I have nothing else to study but my poor father now," she said, dropping her head. Then, as if ashamed of her self-betrayal, and to change the subject, she lifted her head quickly, untied the string of her hat, and threw it aside.

She had put on this hat to appear as if she had just come in from a walk—not because it was at all necessary to deceive Valentine in such a trifling matter, or that the hat was exceedingly pretty—a large straw tied down under her chin, with wide lavender ribbon, which set off her long face and black hair to perfection, which would have been a legitimate excuse for the pretence in any pretty woman—but because the simplest trick was less acceptable to her strange disposition than an elaborate lie.

"Do you think I have altered much?" she asked, now that her hat was off.

"Strikingly."

"For the worse?" she asked, with the first approach to archness.

"If I thought that I should scarcely have admitted the change. I like the new way in which your hair is dressed."

"That is odd. I dress it for myself——"

"Which explains the improvement. I thought Thérèse——"

"Thérèse is gone," she said, the smile leaving her face.

Valentine was not displeased to hear of that young

woman's absence. His satisfaction was betrayed in the tone with which he echoed, "Gone?"

"Yes; when I came home I discovered that she had been deceiving me for years. I fear she is a very naughty girl. We won't talk any more about her, if you please."

Valentine was certainly glad to drop the subject.

"Do you find me changed in any other respect—beyond hairdressing and that kind of thing?" she asked, the shade passing from her face.

"Unequivocally changed—if there is no unpleasant reflection in confessing it. You make me feel so much more at my ease, more myself," he blundered on, growing red with the consciousness of sticking his foot into dangerous ground.

"I am changed," she said, with impulsive emphasis. "Can you guess the cause?"

"The call made upon you, your womanly tenderness, by your father's condition."

"Not that alone. No; I owe more to the influence of Midge Magister. For three months we have been inseparable, and something better I must be by mere contact with one so sweet and innocent."

Valentine glowed again, for what is more delightful than to hear the praise sung of one we love?

"Poor darling Midge!" replied Vivienne, as if involuntarily. "She, too, has changed. You haven't seen her yet?"

"I passed them coming from Cromeby," said

Valentine, with rising alarm. "She was pale as death, and would not see me. Even Mrs. Magister scarcely acknowledged me."

"She dared not. Oh, my poor Midge—poor little Midge!" Vivienne's voice broke down, and she buried her face in her hands.

"Good God! what is the matter?" he cried.

Vivienne sobbed.

"Is she ill?"

Vivienne shook her head.

"Tell me what it is!"

Vivienne wiped the artistic tear from her eyes, and with an effort spoke—her voice thick and broken with emotion.

"A month ago she had not a care in the world—the picture of health and happiness, only a month ago—and now——"

"And now?" he questioned impatiently.

"Oh, Valentine, I must tell you! It would be false sentiment to keep back the truth from you. Poor Midge can never be your wife."

He could not speak for dismay.

"With all my heart I feel for her, dear girl—for I, too, have loved and lost."

"Out with it, for pity's sake!" he said hoarsely.

"Nothing that I tell you will be repeated to any living soul——"

"Need you ask that of your cousin, Vivienne?"

"Forgive me! I was thinking only of poor Midge.

Valentine; her father is a murderer. He was convicted twenty-one years ago, and came out of prison a month ago. I saw him at Menton, in the hotel where they stayed. He was in the hall, and said brutally to the hall-porter; 'Won't see me! You tell Mrs. Magister I'm her son-in-law, Dudley St. John, and she'll see me fast enough.' Of course I got out of the way at once, not to hear more. But Mrs. Magister and Midge left Menton the same day, without even waiting to bid me good-bye."

"Where is he now?" asked Valentine.

"I do not know. He was here in this very room when I came home unexpectedly from Paris. I recognized him at once, but he did not know me. Thérèse, to screen herself, told me that he was 'Miss Magister's' father. And to screen herself yet further, when I found he had been in the house two days, she declared she had permitted him to stay on my behalf, for the sake of Miss Magister, as the man had confessed to her that he was a convicted felon. I would not believe that, and discharged Thérèse on the spot. But I have learnt the truth of the story from the oddest source —my father's papers! Mrs. St. John (Midge's mother) was my nurse."

"Poor little Midge!" exclaimed Valentine in his turn, dropping his head.

SCENE III

NO ADMISSION TO THE RECTORY

After lunch the next day, Valentine, being alone with Vivienne, said—

"I am going to the Rectory."

"To the Rectory?" she said, under her breath.

"Yes. You remember, I promised to tell you when I intended to ask Midge to be my wife."

"Oh, you good, noble Valentine!" she exclaimed, with fervid admiration; and grasping his hand she raised it to her lips in homage.

This to an outsider would have seemed to be an over-acting on her part, but simple Valentine saw in it only the devotion of pure friendship.

If the sins of the father were to be visited on the child, he would be no instrument to the punishment, but rather shield her, God willing, he thought, as he strode through the park. And this was no momentary impulse of generosity; but the conclusion drawn from deliberate judgment after sleeping on the indubitable facts of the case.

The sun shone, and through the quickset hedge

there was a glimpse of light dress on the lawn of the Rectory; a voice, too, indicated to Valentine's quick ear that Midge was there. Should he use the freedom of a friend, and passing round the side of the house seek them on the lawn without formality? The attitude they had taken the day before precluded that. He knocked at the door and gave in his card.

In a few minutes the servant returned to say that Mrs. Magister could see no one that afternoon.

"Miss Magister?" Valentine suggested.

"I was to tell you, sir, if you asked for Miss Magister, to say, if you please, that she could not possibly see you either."

Valentine turned away with regret but not discouraged. He was prepared for refusal, but hoped to find a more favourable opportunity of overcoming his friends' scruples. Instinctively his steps led him as they had before led him, to Rawton Hill, and the sight of the Mill recalling his last eventful meeting with the doctor, he passed through the open door into the dispensary. No one was there; but a sound of movement on the floor above fell upon his ear. He called, and a gruff voice called from above, "Come up!"

The "mad" doctor spent much of his leisure time in mechanical invention. The first-floor was fitted up as a workshop; and there Valentine found the burly doctor in his shirt-sleeves turning a piece of brass in a clockmaker's lathe. Glancing over his shoulder, Dr. Sturgess said sullenly—

"I'll attend to you presently."

There was such total absence of cordiality in the greeting that Valentine doubted if he had been recognized. Valentine glanced round him. Under one window was a carpenter's bench, under another a miniature forge, a brass founding furnace under a third, and a lathe at which the doctor worked under the fourth. On a broad shelf running round the whole chamber were all kinds of paraphernalia—electrical appliances, models, instruments, and tools. A couple of stools showed that the doctor might receive here; so Valentine seated himself on one of them and waited patiently.

After a while Sturgess ceased turning, took the piece of brass from the chuck, examined it closely in the light, and seemingly satisfied with his work set it down on the shelf and turning about said—

"Well, Mr. Biron, what can I do for you?"

He did not offer his hand, and there was no pretence of cordiality in tone or gesture as he plumped himself down on the second stool. Valentine could only accommodate himself to the doctor's strange humour by coming at once to the point uppermost in his mind.

"I have just been up to the Rectory," he said.

"You didn't see anybody there, I suppose?"

"Well, they wouldn't see me."

"You will save yourself unnecessary trouble and them some pain if you don't call there again."

"Why?"

"Because they don't want to see you."

"That was evident to me when I passed them yesterday."

"Did it astonish you?"

"Considerably."

Tapping his hand with a chisel, Dr. Sturgess sat looking at Valentine with penetrating eyes for some moments in silence. Then he said—

"Do you know that there is a very pretty scandal flying about here in which you take a prominent place?"

"I?"

"You. Like most scandals, I suppose this has a basis of truth; but I should greatly like to know how much. Do you care to go into the subject, or——" He jerked his head towards the way out to indicate the alternative.

"Undoubtedly I wish to go into the subject," Valentine responded with emphasis.

"Will you tell me, then, if a French girl named Thérèse Dupont passed the night in your chambers about a month back?"

"Certainly she did," replied Valentine, without the shade of hesitation in voice or expression.

"And where did you pass the night?"

"In a beastly hotel in Tottenham Court Road."

Dr. Sturgess grunted satisfaction with a nod.

"Will you tell me if any love passages ever passed between you and this girl?"

The colour rushed into Valentine's face now as he answered—

"I kissed her once."

"At the same time I believe you were carrying on a pretty extensive flirtation with the girl's mistress?"

It was open to Valentine to protest with truth that the two affairs were not simultaneous, but he scorned to hedge or shield himself in any way.

"That is true," he answered.

"And not content with playing the part of an ass between two bundles of hay, you turned your attentions towards some sweet clover?"

Here again it was open to Valentine to retort that Dr. Sturgess had himself suggested his quitting Vivienne for Midge, but he only affirmed his culpability with a nod, and a husky, "I did."

"Well, now you know why the Rectory door is shut to you."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Isn't it a sufficient reason?" asked the doctor, sharply.

"Sufficient in all conscience," answered Valentine, remorsefully.

Then there followed a long pause, the old doctor regarding the younger man's downcast face with keen comprehension.

"Will you tell me how the girl came to be in your chambers, and why she stayed there?"

Valentine narrated the particulars briefly but quite clearly. Dr. Sturgess again nodded satisfaction.

"I know the exact date," said he, "and I can find out if there was fog in the Channel that day. If there was not, the girl's visit was a planned job, and failure would fully account for vindictiveness on her part. Now tell me what you intended to do at the Rectory this afternoon."

"I meant to confess my fault to Mrs. Magister, and ask her if, nevertheless, she would sanction my asking Miss Magister to be my wife."

"There's the hand of a friend," said the doctor, stretching out his hand and holding Valentine's in his honest grasp; "and I shall prove my friendship by opening the door for you next time you call at the Rectory."

A pause ensued. It seemed to Valentine that there was nothing more to say, and, to change the subject, he asked—

"May I ask what you are working at?"

"An attempt to increase the power of the phonograph by combination with the microphone. The thing is hardly out of the experimental stage, so I don't care to talk much about it. How do you find your uncle?"

"Pitiable. What is it?"

"Senile decay, developing into that worst of all maladies—imaginary malady. Actually there is nothing the matter with him but a disordered digestion, brought on by mental fatigue. Remove the fatigue and its cause, and he will live for a dozen years."

"We think of diverting his thoughts to minor details concerning the management of the estate——"

"An admirable idea. Get him out regularly into the fresh air, and occupy his mind with the question whether to paint a fence or pitch it, and you will do more to cure him than all the physicians in Christendo m. Was that your idea?"

"No, his daughter's."

"She is clever."

"Her father's illness has brought out better qualities than that."

"You think so?" Dr. Sturgess raised his eyebrows and scratched the back of his neck in perplexity.

"I am certain of it. She has changed even more than my uncle in the last six months. Much is due, perhaps, to her intimacy with Miss Magister."

"Well, thank God it's not the other way about. Midge is unaltered."

"You must have found also a great change in my cousin?"

"A change; perhaps. I cannot say. She baffles my understanding, I confess. Only this I know—she will turn out to be a good woman or——" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Or what, sir?"

"Or a fiend incarnate. Lord Rawton was vastly exercised when last I saw him by the loss of some papers."

Valentine laughed.

"He fancies he has mislaid fifty thousand pounds—the whole of his fortune, save a thousand or two—and can't remember where he has put them. Of course an accountant will find out at once."

"Then I should advise you to employ an accountant pretty soon, Mr. Biron. If the old man should go, and his secret be buried with him, you may find the estate encumbered pretty heavily, and with a burden which you may be unable to cast off—Lady Vivienne to wit."

SCENE IV

VALENTINE'S CHAMPION

For some time Dr. Sturgess sat musing where Valentine had left him, tapping the open palm of one hand with the blade of his chisel at intervals, as though mentally ticking off eventualities. Then he glanced lovingly at his lathe, softly whistled two bars of a tune, and suddenly breaking off flung down the chisel, rose, jerked on a hat and jacket, and walked off to the Rectory.

He found Mrs. Magister alone in her drawing-room, sitting woe-begone before the tea-table. The doctor accepted a cup, helped himself to toast, and coming from general remarks to particulars said—

"Where's Midge?"

"Upstairs, poor girl; she is feeling very unwell this afternoon."

"And went up to escape the doctor?" Dr. Sturgess cast a significant glance at an untouched cup of tea on the table. "Eyes red and swollen, been crying—so, by the way, have you, ma'am."

"It's so distressing to see her unhappy."

"And so unusual."

"I never saw her so cut up in my life."

"I thought there might be something amiss with her, and so came up to prescribe. Symptoms appeared yesterday, and culminated soon after Mr. Biron called here."

"How did you know?"

"From the other patient. He came up to me when he couldn't get admission here."

"It was such a surprise to us. We were going slowly up the hill when Midge caught sight of him in the distance. She was delighted, poor child, at the prospect of meeting him, and then I had to tell her most decisively that something had happened which made it impossible for us to acknowledge him. She had not recovered from the shock when he passed us."

"And she asked for an explanation?"

"Of course."

"You did not show her the venomous letter written to you by that —— sweet creature Thérèse?"

"Dr. Sturgess! Do you think I would breathe a word of such an abomination in the ear of an innocent child?"

"An innocent child of twenty-one who does not know the difference between right and wrong is an imbecile. Ignorance, madam, is not innocence; and the more distinctly we can define black from white the greater possibility there is of our keeping clean and spotless if we have a proper sense of decency. You

might have shown her that letter with perfect confidence that it would do her no harm, nor him either, for she would not have believed one word of it."

"Do you think so, doctor?"

"Think, ma'am! I am certain. Would he, or you, or I, believe any aspersion on the character of Midge? The baseness of such an accusation is its own condemnation."

"Then you don't believe it?"

"The graver charge is certainly false, and I could prove it is if it were worth the trouble to make a simple inquiry, or if I valued the word of a gentleman less than that of a vindictive hussy."

"I'm glad to hear this, of course, doctor; but the other charges?"

"The flirtation is not denied. Doubtless Mr. Biron, in common with every other healthy young man of his age—or any young woman either, ma'am, for that matter—has had his love affairs. But they are not in the nature of an infidelity, since they took place before he knew Midge."

Mrs. Magister replied.

"Granny," said the doctor gently, "we must not expect this young man to be an angel simply because he wishes to marry Midge. A certain licence is allowed to all young people, at any rate in this country, before marriage, and a very wise precaution, too, if it lead them, as it usually does, to more sober conduct after."

"Of course you are right," replied Mrs. Magister.

Dr. Sturgess nodded emphatic acquiescence.

"But does it not seem to you quite extraordinary that Midge should have formed such a strong attachment for Mr. Biron, having seen him only for a few hours and those six months since?"

"Not at all. I liked him the moment I saw him; so did you. And I like him at this moment not less, and I warrant now you have got this nonsense out of your head it would please you as well as it does me to look in his honest face. And do you think our hearts are less susceptible than Midge's—that we could see more to admire in his eyes than she can find? I tell you, these young people's souls lie open as a book to their eyes, and they were pledged for life to each other at their first meeting. And if their love has stood the test of six months' separation, 'tis a proof that instinct is strengthened by reason. Reason alone can undo what reason has done, and I am desperately mistaken in that girl's character and disposition if she will abandon her heart's desire because of any vague objections you may trump up for the occasion."

"Trump up!" exclaimed Mrs. Magister, in a tone of indignation.

"I said 'trump up,' madam; but I am open to correction. Will you tell me what you actually said to Midge when you saw young Biron on the hilltop?"

"I said that he was an undesirable person for us to know."

And you have given her no explanation why he is undesirable?"

"How could I?"

"You didn't. 'Hinc illæ lachrymae': hence these tears."

Mrs. Magister put up a handkerchief to her own eyes.

"I can't tell why you are so vexed with me, doctor," she whimpered.

"I am vexed with you, madam, for resorting to an unworthy subterfuge."

"A subterfuge!" cried Mrs. Magister, whipping the handkerchief from her eyes and firing with anger. "Dr. Sturgess, you are never remarkable for pleasant speaking, but this passes the bounds of toleration. How have I been guilty of employing a subterfuge?"

"By an oblique imputation upon Mr. Biron's character, which is more damaging than any transparent lie of such a person as Thérèse Dupont; made to escape the unpleasant alternative of telling Midge what is the real impediment to her marriage. You dared not say to her, 'Your father is Dudley St. John, a murderer, now let loose on society and likely at any moment to turn up here.'"

"Hush! she may hear you."

"Midge is no eavesdropper. You believed, or fancied you believed, this story against Biron because it suited you; you would have scorned it had there

been no other obstacle to Midge becoming the future Lady Rawton."

"Would you have me tell her?"

"No," answered Dr. Sturgess, after a moment's reflection. "The situation is sufficiently involved without the addition of false sentiment to make matters worse. And false sentiment there would be if Midge believed herself disgraced by her father. There is no necessity to tell her; but you must be perfectly open and candid with Biron. And if, when he knows the facts, he is still desirous of making Midge his wife, I think you will have abundant proof that his sincerity and fidelity are beyond suspicion. A finer test of his manhood and nobility you can hardly imagine."

"A very severe test. A man in Mr. Biron's position—the future Lord Rawton—might well hesitate to marry under such conditions."

"He might decline without reproach. To his greater honour, therefore, if he does not decline."

"But ought Midge not to know——"

"I say no," answered Dr. Sturgess, rising; "and I hold myself responsible for all consequences."

"Oh, doctor—do you really think it might come about?"

"It shall come about," he replied, planting his feet apart and thrusting his hands in his pockets.

"My darling Midge!" Mrs. Magister's eyes filled again, but this time with prospective happiness.

"Not a word of this, not a hint of hope to her till you have seen Biron and had it out with him. When shall he come?"

"It would be better if Midge were not at home, or how should I justify seeing him then after refusing him this afternoon?"

"When will she be out?"

"On Thursday she is going to a garden-party at——"

"On Thursday, then, he will come."

He was moving towards the door. Mrs. Magister stopped him.

"One moment. I spoke very hastily just now, forgetting what a dear and true friend you are. Will you forgive me?"

"I wish I could forgive myself as easily. Ah, Granny; I have much to answer for, if you only knew all."

* * * * *

One thing he had to answer for. He might have spared Mrs. Magister a most uncomfortable interview, and did not.

But in excuse, it must be said that his mind was greatly exercised by the mysterious disappearance of £50,000.

SCENE V

THE LOST FORTUNE

"Rawton Hall, May 3, 1901.

"My very dearest Thérèse," Vivienne wrote in French, here translated freely. "Your letter charms me; it supplies that little dash of spice which is rather lacking here since you left me. I envy you your apartment in the Avenue Merceau and your many adventures, but I promise myself a large share in your pleasures as soon as my serious business here is ended. Your history of the intrigue with 'Sir Johnson' is good enough for the Palais Royal; I can see the poor man dropping his pince-nez in the soup when his wife marched into the *sàlle-a-manger*. It will teach him to engage a cabinet particulier in the future.

"That letter has succeeded to a marvel. He arrived yesterday, and was cut dead in the road by the virtuous ladies of the Rectory; since then he has called upon them and had the door slammed in his face. After that he went up to our Black Beast, but learned nothing from him, so far as I can make out, beyond the fact that Rawton may live another dozen of years if his thoughts can be diverted into a healthier channel.

And I intend to make the experiment. This may surprise you; but really I am not half so afraid of the Black Beast as I was, and believe that he is not much more unmanageable than the rest. That lavender dress has done wonders. It mystified him at first; now it gives him the impression that I'm a kind of New Magdalen; and if he could only see me in bigoudies and a print gown he would think me as saintly. That's just what I want.

"You know how I look when I come from my bath and sit down in a peignoir before my dressing-table—well, I would let him see me like that if it could persuade him to let things run on smoothly for another six months without any interference on his part. You see, I would rather be Lady Rawton than the most celebrated demimondaine, and prefer Rawton Hall for life to a ten years' lease of the prettiest bon-bon box in Paris. This is not because I am growing seriously goody-goody, but because I am more smitten than ever with V. B. The man who throws himself at one's feet at the first beckoning glance must be such an imbecile that one grows sick of him in a week; but he who is only to be won by finesse and long endeavour is a prize worth winning and keeping, and the excitement is kept up by the difficulty of keeping him. Pursuit is everything; possession a very poor thing—unless your possession is likely to get away. I declare that when he half smothered me with kisses I never felt one tithe of the emotion that now tingles in my

veins when he takes my hand and says 'Good morning.' I hurry to finish dressing if I hear his voice. I look for him as I go downstairs. If his eyes are cold when we meet they chill me to the marrow; if there is kindness in them—and there generally is—I glow to the roots of my hair. I am ever craving to be near him; if he is about I cannot forget him. I long to throw myself in his arms, yet I must constantly guard against betraying a sign of passion lest I should alarm him. He is always courteous, usually kind, and sometimes even tender; yet I must always play the same responsive part, and keep my demonstrations one degree of warmth below his. Fancy what this self-restraint means to one of my nature and habits! He seems to my eyes much handsomer than he was; this evening when we sat in the half light I thought I had never seen any man so absolutely perfect in feature and bearing. I would have given the world to touch his foot, his knee, his hand; yet the most I dared to do was to nip the edge of his coat that touched my skirt and squeeze it till my finger cracked. I stole one of his cigars and burnt it in my bedroom that I might fancy he was there. I know now what it is to be wildly in love—for the very first time; and want to grow yet more mad.

"Thérèse, I swear that man shall marry me, or I will kill him!

"What are the chances that he will marry me? Good, if I can only keep my emotions in restraint, and

play the game out patiently to the end. It has come to this stage—that he loves that other woman no better than me. I know that, for he was not a little bit cast down by her refusal to see him to-day. Not any more than might be easily accounted for by wounded pride under such a rebuff. He was quite light-hearted and cheerful, and talked to me without a sign of uneasiness or restraint. Oh, what a difference! Though I felt in the seventh heaven I could say nothing, and was as awkward as a schoolgirl. I could not even fence with words; all the wit was on his side.

"I know all this must be tedious reading to you—if it doesn't seem utterly ridiculous—but I can think of nothing but him, being now in that mood, and so will write no more to-night."

* * * * *

"I have been thinking during the night, Valentine," said Rawton, when they met at the breakfast-table on Monday morning, "that it might be very beneficial for my body and my mind if I put my papers aside for a few days and gave my attention to matters concerning the estate, which seem to call for personal investigation."

"A very good and practical idea, sir," replied Valentine, with a smile at the old man's evident belief that the notion was entirely spontaneous on his part.

"This is the first idea that has dawned upon me for some time, although once the influx was so abundant

as to be absolutely bewildering, and I can only regard it as a hopeful sign of returning mental vigour."

"There can be no doubt of it, darling," purred Vivienne.

"But, my dear," continued Rawton, with increasing animation, "a still more remarkable conception occurred to me in the course of my cogitation. Why should I not attack the difficulties that beset me from the end rather than seek their origin from the beginning? Why, beginning at the end, should I not work gradually back till I reach that point at which my fortune suddenly disappeared?"

"I am sure, darling, you never hit upon a happier thought in your most brilliant days," said Vivienne, who herself had suggested this plan before separating overnight.

The old man patted her hand with a deprecating shake of the head, which only pointed his self-satisfaction.

"And so, Val, if you have nothing better to do, we will drive over this morning to my agent, what's his name?—Simmonds—and make an exhaustive inquiry into the position of our affairs. He shall go with us to the various farms and see for ourselves that this outlay for repairs is not excessive. In this estimate of £1400 there is an item of 15*s.* for barbed wire which must be sifted to the bottom. I have a standard foot-measure which is mathematically correct. We will measure the space to be wired, ascertain the number of nails required, and the posts, what labour must be employed,

and from these data form a just calculation of the grand total."

They went over the ground in the morning and returned to it after lunch, to the sullen disgust of the hard-headed agent. But Valentine supported the old man loyally, measuring with scrupulous exactitude, comparing notes, and treating Rawton's most futile objections seriously with untiring patience and perfect indifference to the scarcely disguised contempt of Mr. Simmonds. His kindly and affectionate nature scarcely felt the tax upon his generosity. He would have played the fool to please a child, just as he put himself on a level with this feeble poor old man to give him happiness. He had no especial affection for his uncle; his tenderness sprang from the common sympathy which the really strong have for the weak.

Rawton was supremely happy in this trumpery occupation. He felt that he was recovering his lost faculty, dealing with detail and systematic classification—that faculty which had made him an admirable secretary (and kept him at that). The beneficial effect on his health was immediate. He ate a good dinner, slept well after it, and returned to the charge with renewed vigour the next morning. By lunch time the notes concerning the outlay for barbed wire were all collected, and the afternoon being wet he devoted himself to bringing facts and figures into comprehensive form on blue foolscap, with due margin for notes, and all the elaborate precision of an official report.

This gave Valentine an opportunity of seeing Simmonds alone, and getting through him and the estate books a fair perception of the position of affairs. And as that involved Vivienne's interests, he considered that it ought not to be withheld from her knowledge. An occasion presented itself in the evening.

"Dr. Sturgess came this afternoon and wished to see you, Valentine," she said, adding as she looked through the open window: "It doesn't rain now. Wouldn't you like to go up to him at once?"

"I should like to have a talk with you first, if you can spare me half an hour."

"If! Don't you know that every moment of my life is at your command, cousin?"

"I hope it may not seem an abuse of that privilege to open a serious discussion after dinner."

"Am I so very frivolous?"

"So absolutely reasonable that I take your permission for granted. Shall we sit here?"

"Yes; the smell of the earth after the rain is so good—the air so still and sweet"—and the light just falling as it should upon her profile.

"I have had a long jaw with Simmonds this afternoon," he began, seating himself in an angle of the window to face Vivienne, and dropping his elbows on his knees.

"About the repairs?"

"No; we can leave them to my uncle. We have to face a graver difficulty. Two of the principal farms

on the estate will be thrown up at Michaelmas unless a reduction is made in the rent; and if a reduction is made to those tenants the rest must be treated in the same way."

"Ought the rents to be lowered?"

"I think it is absolutely necessary. No farmer will pay more than the average value of land in the neighbourhood."

"Then I am sure my father will agree to the reduction."

"It means a reduction of the rent-roll to very small proportions. You may know if he has been living within his income?"

"I do. Until the beginning of last year he always spent less—within a few pounds. He was proud of this, and every year he would show me his balance-sheet, drawn up with the utmost precision, as you can imagine he would—poor darling! But since then he has gone very far beyond his income—in preparing this house, in carriages and horses, and servants, and all that. You see when I came of age he seemed to think it necessary to give me a fixed home, and—to—to provide for my future—and that has led to all this trouble."

Valentine saw that there was more in this than even her words implied, and waited for her to continue. She dropped her chin upon her breast and ground one hand within the other on her knee as one in deep distress might. Then suddenly she covered her

face with her hands, and cried, "Oh, my poor darling!" with a succession of short, quick sobs in diminuendo.

"What is it, Vivienne?" Valentine asked, laying his hand gently on her arm.

She seized his hand, pressed it within her own, wound her fingers through his, clung to them convulsively—a passionate demonstration which might be attributed to filial emotion. So Valentine construed it. How could he tell that she cared no more for Rawton than for the man in the moon?

"I should have known that it would distress you," he said, though scarcely seeing now exactly why; "let's drop the subject."

"Oh no, no! I wanted to tell you all. It is a relief. I was silly to break down like that. See, I am quite calm now."

She relinquished his hand reluctantly, and turned her face, full of ineffable sadness, to him, her beautiful lashes, as she knew, glistening with the artistic tear.

"It was in this way, Valentine," she continued. "He had that fixed idea of providing for my happiness, of endowing us—me—how shall I say it?—of leaving me a fortune that would enable me to—to take a high position in society."

Of giving her a portion which would enable Valentine to keep up the Hall when he married her, was the hint she desired to convey—with success. Valentine, bowing his head, nodded comprehension.

"And early in April," she pursued, "his agent in

London sold out Consols to the amount of £45,000. The cheque was sent to him, and he paid it into the Credit Lyonnaise at Monaco. A few days after he drew the whole sum out—it is written in his diary—the last note he has written in it. After that all is blank."

"And it is still a mystery to you what he did with that sum?"

"It never has been a mystery to me, Valentine?" she said, in the low tone of a reluctant confession.

Valentine raised his head in quick surprise. Her head was bowed in silent agony.

"The Credit Lyonnaise at Monaco," she continued, in the same hushed tone, "faces the Casino."

"Oh, you think he lost it at the gaming tables?"

"I am sure of it. I kept him from them whilst I could, fearing the temptation the tables would have for him under that fixed idea of his. You know how easily one may read the poor darling's thoughts. But there were times when I could not be with him. At night——"

"Yes, yes," said Valentine. The explanation seemed to him so natural that he wondered how it could have escaped his imagination. "Of course you never questioned him on the subject?"

"How could I? From the moment I found his fortune was lost, my endeavour has been to turn his thoughts from it—to make him forget it. Have I succeeded? Oh, I fear not!" There was a pause,

and then, laying her hand on his, she said, "Valentine, can we do anything in the world to keep this new trouble from him? If he finds himself compelled to give up the Hall—to cut down expenses, and live within the limited means produced by the estate—his mind will break down, and the end will come. If we could lead him to believe he may yet save something in the years he has to live, to provide for my subsistence when he is gone, we might avert that awful thing."

Again he raised his head to look at her inquiringly.

"This I know is his only hope. He is ever thinking how he may save money. That petty matter of fifteen shillings shows the direction of his thoughts. Oh, it would be ridiculous if it were not so pathetic, these petty economies—as if they are to keep me from want! He will spend nothing, nothing, nothing on himself, though still ready to give me without a moment's reflection anything which can please me for a moment."

"Tell me what 'awful thing' it is you fear," Valentine asked.

She glanced over her shoulder to be sure they were alone, then, dropping her voice to a whisper, said—

"That last resort of a ruined man driven to distraction—suicide. I have seen the fearful thought in his eyes again and again, as he came from brooding in his study over the figures and papers that were turning

his brain to madness. I must save him from that—my poor, poor darling! There are my jewels, Val—my diamonds are worth some thousands—I shall never wear them again. Will you help me to sell them?"

"When nothing else is to be done."

"What else can be done?"

"It should not be impossible to raise money by mortgage. I will see a solicitor."

"Oh, you great, noble, large-hearted cousin!" she cried; and, slipping from her chair, she fell upon her knees at his feet, and lifted his hand to her lips.

* * * * *

It was late when Valentine reached Rawton Mill. He found only a note awaiting him there.

"Called out to see a patient six miles away, and may not return before morning. I wished to tell you that you are expected at the Rectory to-morrow afternoon about three. I particularly want to see you after your visit there. Will you dine with me here between seven and eight?—John Sturgess."

Valentine left an answer with the doctor's factotum, accepting the invitation.

SCENE VI

FOR THE SAKE OF VIVIENNE

Returning from the tennis party at Salford, with her racquet on the handle-bar of her machine, Midge had entered the beech avenue—all tenderly green now with the young foliage—where she had first met Valentine when she spied that gentleman in the distance standing by his bike, and conjured into being as it seemed, out of the memory inspired by the place.

She had been forbidden to acknowledge him as a friend, and the injunction was not yet removed. What should she do? Retreat was impossible. She must pass him with such bare recognition as common politeness demanded, and no more. It was horrible to have to cut him like that for no offence on his part that she knew of—a moral outrage upon her kindlier sentiment and generous impulse. Yet it must be done, and she nerved herself to the ordeal, putting on pace that it might be quickly done and over.

But he stood in her way, and before she could decide whether to steer right or left of him he held up a slip of paper; at that she put on the brake, and stepped down.

"A message from Mrs. Magister," he said, giving the note.

"Mr. Biron brings this with my love, dear Midge. The difficulty is removed," she read, and then giving voice to her heart she exclaimed, looking up in Valentine's face, her own radiant with smiles—

"Oh, I am so glad!"

"And so am I," said he, holding out his hand.

Then they shook hands and laughed as if nothing had happened to perplex and fret them in the past.

"Do you know this spot?" he asked.

She pretended to examine it, though really she knew it just as well as he did.

"I believe I sat down on that heap of stones to wonder what in the world I should do when my tyre went down and I found I had no pump," she said, her pretty eyes twinkling with arch merriment.

"And I will swear to having stood exactly on this spot when I first spoke to you. That's why I stayed here to meet you. I like to believe in lucky days, and lucky signs, and lucky places, don't you?"

"I think I like all sorts of nonsense," she confessed.

"Well, it's infinitely preferable to the other thing. Are you pressed for time?"

"I ought to be home by seven."

"That gives us just an hour and thirty-five minutes. Down there is a signpost that points to Shipton Manor; would that take us too far?"

"Not a bit," said she, stepping into her saddle.

"Now Granny has dropped the reins I feel like running away—just a little."

"We'll not spoil the run by one grave thought this side of Rawton Heath," said Valentine, pedalling to her side. "Would Shipton Manor take us too far afield?"

"Too far, if I am to escape a scolding. When you get through the beeches and come amongst the firs and larches, the road becomes a mere cart-track in the sand and loses itself altogether on Shipton Common. It would take a whole morning to do conscientiously."

"To-morrow morning, for instance?"

"Oh yes—if we may. You haven't been down there?"—looking down the tempting road as they passed the signpost.

"Never."

"Oh, it's lovely now. The common is one great sheet of golden gorse. Larks love the place. You hear their song and wonder where it comes from till you find a tiny fluttering speck high up in the blue. And the gorse smells like honey. Right down in the hollow lies Little Shipton, and beyond the red roofs spreads the still sea. It makes one ache to stand there alone; you want every one you love to be there and share your delight—one at a time," she added, with her coy sidelong glance and smile. "It is lovely in the autumn too, when the trees redden and the common is purple with heather. If you stand very still and patiently, rabbits come from their holes—the young

ones are out now, the prettiest little things in the world, and they browse quite calmly till they catch some movement; then up go brown ears and white tails and away they scuttle. And you may find out all sorts of wonderful wee little beasties if you use your eyes, and flowers that grow nowhere else."

"I wonder how it would be in the winter?"

"Oh, just as lovely in its way, I am sure. I have never seen England in winter, except in pictures, but they lead me to imagine how my common must look with sparkling frost in the brown heather, a veil of blue mist hanging over the village, and the sun sinking red to the sea. I long for a winter here, with the keen bracing air to make exercise delightful—away from hotels and mandolines, and bath-chairs and all that."

"You would like your home here then, all the year round?"

"Why, that's my dream! I have even pitched upon the house I should like to live in."

"Ah!"

"There's a quaint old house with Dutch gables and huge chimney-stacks standing right on the edge of the common. There is no lovelier point of view. And behind the house there is an Italian garden with low clipped hedges and a colonnade, and then a wide lawn stretching to a buttressed wall upon the common just high enough to keep out the rabbits. One day we bribed a gardener to let us peep inside the house, and that is as quaint and picturesque as the outside, with

wonderful chimney-pieces, a beautiful staircase, and rooms that made me long to furnish them as they might have been furnished ages ago. Even Granny caught my enthusiasm. But what was the use of that? We could never afford to live there, even if it were to let. It's the Manor House, you know. But no one lives there now; and it's only just kept from falling into decay. But oh, I wish I lived there!"

"So do I."

"Why?"

"I confessed to liking lucky signs and circumstances."

"I don't quite see the connection, though."

"Well, long ago, my great, great, great, great-grandfather found his bride at Shipton Manor."

The girl blushed to the roots of her pretty hair.

"Ah, we pledged ourselves to only talk nonsense," she said, laughing lightly.

"And you broke away by talking poetry, and the romance of simple fact is poetry."

A village green, a group of children, a hissing goose, waddling with outstretched neck towards her goslings, turned their conversation into other channels for a while; but Midge's thought reverting in a pause to her former theme, she said—

"How odd that you should know more about Shipton Manor than I—never having seen it."

"It is now part of my uncle's estate; Simmonds, the agent, was speaking to me about it yesterday. That's how I came to suggest going round there to look at it.

It's a bit of a white elephant, you see, costing a good sum yearly to keep up, and serving very little purpose. That was of little consequence while Rawton could afford it; but, unfortunately, he is no longer a rich man, and we have to study how expenses may be cut down. Simmonds thinks the Manor might be let."

"I am so sorry to hear that, for Vivienne's sake. She told me she had no independent fortune—that all must come to her from her father."

"And he, I fear, has lost all."

"All?"

"All."

"Oh, this is dreadful! May I speak to her on the subject?" she asked, with true sympathy.

"She is sure to tell you, loving you as she does, when no hope is left. I had to tell you, because my own position is affected considerably by my uncle's loss. It occurred to me that I might take the Manor as a means of lessening the difficulty. Not alone, that would be out of the question; but if you would live there, too?"

"This is not nonsense, is it?" she asked, with a faint attempt to make light of matter too weighty.

"We are on Rawton Heath now, and I am very much in earnest," he replied gravely.

It was odd to make a proposal of marriage cycling across the open heath, but he had foreseen refusal, and fixed upon this time and place as a means of shortening her embarrassment.

"I came from the Rectory with Mrs. Magister's permission to ask you to be my wife," he pursued.

"Did Granny tell you that my father was a bad man—I know no more than that—and that my name was changed because his was stained?"

"She told me that as an explanation of the barrier set up between us. But it is no barrier, Midge, to my love; and none, I hope, to yours."

They were silent for some minutes. There was no ray of hope on either of their downcast faces. Midge slowed down for the last few words as they came within sight of the Rectory.

"I am thinking of Vivienne," said Midge. He knew that. "Valentine, what would become of her? I know that you would never let her want for anything that you could give. But think of her pride—could she accept anything from you—from us? And she loves you with her whole soul. I know it, if you do not. It is your heart she wants, nothing less."

"That is not mine to give."

"In time, Valentine, in time. It is she who should live at Shipton."

"No, you, alone, Midge. I can marry no one else."

They had stepped to the ground. She gave him her hand.

"Good-bye, Valentine," she said, striving to speak firmly, as she gave her hand.

"Good-bye, Midge," he answered.

They stood with clasped hands for a minute, looking in each other's face with ineffable love. But there was no hope of happiness in their eyes. And hers, despite herself, filled with tears ere she could turn away.

SCENE VII

VALENTINE'S MISSION

What Dr. Sturgess liked himself, he offered his friend; so a chop and half a bottle of Burgundy constituted Biron's dinner that evening. But the chop was excellent, and the Burgundy of the best, and the doctor cleverly avoided any topic of conversation which might spoil the flavour of either. When he opened the cigar-box, however, he abruptly broached the subject uppermost in the mind of each.

"Well, you called at the Rectory this afternoon and heard all that Mrs. Magister had to tell you about that thorough-paced scoundrel, Dudley St. John."

Valentine assented.

"And you declined to visit the sins of the father upon his child."

"His fault in no way lessens my affection for her."

"Rather heightens it, I should say, by the addition of a chivalrous sentiment. So you offered her your hand."

"And she refused," said Valentine stiffly, with the evident wish of closing the subject.

"Why?" asked the doctor, persevering, in spite of his perception that the topic was unpleasant to his guest.

"Because Miss Magister considered that her friend, my cousin, had a greater claim than she."

"And you share that opinion, Mr. Biron, or you would have quickly overruled the objection."

"My cousin has a very great claim upon me," Valentine said, more stiffly still.

"If you were not beneath my roof you would have replied—'What the devil has that to do with you, John Sturgess? Mind your own business, and leave me to manage my own affairs in my own way.' Unfortunately I am very deeply involved in this complication, and it is my duty to clear it up and to row in the same boat with you. But for that reason I dare not tell you until I am assured that you will row with me and not against me. You may be pretty sure that a man of my age and size is actuated by no love of meddling, and that neither match-making nor match-breaking is particularly to my tastes. I have a very grave suspicion which may do mischief or undo it; for my own sake and yours I must confirm that suspicion or remove it, with your help or without it. Now, Mr. Biron, it is open to you to light your cigar or bid me good night."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Valentine, striking a match after a minute's reflection.

"Tell me what new claim Lady Vivienne has upon

you. Remember past obligations were wiped off the slate before you proposed to Midge."

"My cousin may be left at any moment without a penny in the world."

"I can't see that such a misfortune would oblige you to marry her."

"No; but that misfortune might make it impossible for me to marry at all. The rent-roll is not large—not nearly sufficient for the upkeep of the Hall. All deductions made, I doubt if it will yield as much as my cousin has been accustomed to spend upon dress. Actually, I know I shall have a right to take every penny that is yielded by the estate; but morally I consider that all should be given to my uncle's daughter."

"That is supposing that Rawton has actually lost his fortune."

"I fear there can be do doubt upon that point."

"Will you tell me why?"

"In the early part of April he sold out Consols to the value of £45,000. A cheque sent to him for that amount was paid into the Credit Lyonnaise at Monaco; and a few days later was drawn out; and there is every reason to believe that he lost it at Monte Carlo."

"Who told you this?"

"My cousin confessed this belief to me last evening."

Dr. Sturgess mumbled a word or two that might

have been "ingenuous," but sounded more like "ingenious."

"He left the Riviera on the tenth; £45,000 is a lot to lose in that time."

"Not more than may be lost on a horse race in half an hour. The bank of Monte Carlo offers every facility for losing money."

"Your uncle seems to me a particularly careful man."

"Yes; but a man of systems, and, with his enfeebled power of reasoning, one particularly susceptible to the misleading calculation of chances."

"The investment of his capital in Consols, on the other hand, indicates an aversion to hazardous speculation."

"He was content to have an annual balance always on the right side, and probably had no inducement to speculate."

"And what special inducement had he at the beginning of last month?"

"He found, for the first time in his life probably, the balance of his account on the wrong side—the expenses at the Hall having drawn heavily on his capital. In addition to this he greatly wished to see my cousin married to me, and to make a suitable provision for her."

"She confessed this also?"

"Yes; but he may have another object—to so increase his capital that he might leave me a sum to

keep up the Hall without calling upon my wife for supplies."

Sturgess made no reply to this; but, rising, paced the room for some moments in silent thought.

"Who knows himself, or sees his own illusions?" he mentally soliloquized. "Here is a strong man who from a mistaken sense of duty may do a weak thing. That woman sees his illusions as well as I, and will work on them if she has the chance. A fortnight's cajolery might bind him to her for life. She shan't have the chance."

With this he seated himself again, and said—

"If this theory is right, it's a bad job for all of us —not excepting myself even. If the money can be found it will be good for your cousin, your sweetheart, yourself, and me. That sounds like a truism, doesn't it?"

"Rather."

"There can be no reflection on Lady Vivienne's sincerity in attempting to disprove her theory. If the money has not been lost at Monte Carlo it may be found elsewhere. This is to her advantage."

"Clearly."

"Then will you try to disprove the theory?"

"How?"

"By going down to Monte Carlo and making a systematic and exhaustive inquiry. Under proper representation—say with the personal assistance of the British Consul—the Credit Lyonnaise will tell you if

the money *was* paid in and drawn out—what date, whether the out-pay was by cheque or in bullion, etc. The bank at Monte Carlo, I am told, is punctilious in assisting any discovery of error or deception." ("Fraud" was the word in his mind.) "The weekly account there I dare say scarcely fluctuates beyond a few thousand francs; the gain from one player of over a million francs in one week would certainly be shown in their receipts. If they can show any considerable rise in their receipts at that time we may take it that Rawton's money is gone."

"And if not?"

"Then we must look for it elsewhere. Will you undertake the job—it can be done within a week."

"When ought it to be done?"

"The sooner the better, certainly. Start to-morrow morning. The Cromeby express leaves at eight."

Valentine smoked in silence.

"You are thinking how Lady Vivienne will take your sudden departure?"

Valentine nodded.

"From what I have read it is not unusual for a young man under refusal to immediately quit the scene of his discomfiture—a simple line left for Lady Vivienne—'Miss Magister has declined to be my wife,' will fully, and I dare to say very satisfactorily account for your absence."

"And my uncle?"

"You need have no apprehension on his account.

I met him this afternoon, and he seemed to think it an impertinence to be asked how he was. He is now calculating the cost of gateposts; and Simmonds is the only one who is likely to be worried into the grave in the immediate future."

"I will go," said Valentine, rising.

* * * * *

"Good thing to get him away from that low-lying Hall," said the doctor to himself when his guest was gone. "Never did agree with any one. I warrant he won't be so anxious to come back after a week on the Mediterranean and another in Paris. But what on earth," he muttered with a wry face as he scratched his ear, "what on earth has that woman done with the money?"

* * * * *

"That woman," continuing her letter to Thérèse the following evening, wrote—

"Everything is for the best, in this best of all possible worlds; the scandal scheme having failed to choke off the Magisters, I have tried another which has succeeded to a marvel. V. B. offered his hand to M. M. yesterday, and was refused. V. went away by the first train this morning, leaving me a letter of explanation; that is quite the regular thing to do in the circumstances, and saves me a lot of trouble. The battle is half won. However, to make sure of my ground, I ran down to the Rectory this morning—friendship and affectionate solicitude excusing an

informal visit, in that wonder-working lavender dress, of course, and with just a touch of bistre and rouge on my eyelids. You would have been mad with jealousy, dear, if you could have seen how I caressed that girl —her nose was red, her eyes puffed, and her skin the colour of vellum ; I kissed and hugged her till I grew quite moist with her tears and the exertion. I showed her V.'s letter, and, kneeling at her feet, implored her to call him back. I told her his happiness was dearer to me than my own, more to me than the whole world, or all the world could give. And she believed me. So it followed as a matter of course that she could not marry him, and must leave his happiness for me to look after. It might have been difficult to close the scene effectively, but, happily, the Black Beast dropped in at the right moment and gave me the means of withdrawing in good style. Dr. S—— was quite civil, indeed, I believe the lavender dress has partly converted him. I feel sure that black would do it completely. By the way, dear, when you write again, tell me if you have seen any mourning dress in Paris that is not offensive. I loathe crape ; the feel of it and the smell of it is absolutely disgusting, but if it were under something silky, soft, and semi-transparent, scented with lavender water, or any old-fashioned perfume to harmonize with disconsolate feelings, it would do. And I really ought to have it quite soon. I must have V. back here within eight days at the outside. And immediately after we ought to be engaged. That is what I have to prepare for. You

will think this is a large undertaking, but it is really not so difficult as it seems.

"Of course I would not let her tell me so, but I know perfectly well that M. M. refused V. because I had led her tacitly to believe that he was pledged to me. But he would never have taken her refusal on that ground if he had been very keen on marrying her. Without vanity, I think I may say that I hold just as good a place in his affections as she does, and that I have won that place by sheer skill and tact. A little while ago he positively disliked me; I am convinced now that he feels quite a tender affection (don't laugh, Thérèse) for me. Otherwise why should he so easily relinquish M. M., who he must have seen worships him. The fact is, my dear, he foresees quite well that he *must* marry me. My father's affairs are so terribly involved by the loss of his fortune that I shall be absolutely penniless at his death, and how is a man with any pretence to noble sentiments and fine feeling to cast me off in that condition?

"What really ought to be arranged is this: My father to die suddenly, and V. to be called here to find me in deep mourning. (Do go at once to the Magazine de Louvre and see what they have at the Comptoir des deuilles, please.) But I do not see exactly how it is to be done. For my poor father, who would certainly have shot himself at the least suggestion from me any time these last two months, has now found an occupation which threatens to make him live for ten

years. He has some absurd notion that by saving a few pence every day he will build up another fortune before he dies; and this 'lubie' is so firmly fixed in his old head that I can't shake it in the least. He is firmly convinced that he has taken a new lease of life, and I cannot make him believe even that it is dangerous for him to go out in the wet. This upsets my arrangements dreadfully, but——"

Here "Lady Judas" once more broke off her letter abruptly, to dive into the pocket of her dress as a sudden idea flashed upon her mind.

See drew out a letter and read it.

"Rendezvous des Touristes,
"Roquebrun, Alpes Maritimes.

"MADAME,

"You were good enough to say at our last meeting that should I find myself in difficulties I might apply to you for assistance. My financial difficulties have never been greater than they are now. The bank at Monte Carlo refuses even to pay my fare to England.

"I do not appeal to you for pity, but I beg to assure you that there is nothing in the world which I would not do in return for your kindness.

"Sincerely yours,
"DUDLEY ST. JOHN."

Lady Vivienne crossed to her writing-table and wrote the following reply, to which she appended neither signature, address, nor date—

"If you can possibly resist the temptation to lose the enclosed note at the tables, come to me at once—later than Friday next will be useless—and I may give you further assistance."

She enclosed a note for five pounds, addressed the letter to St. John, and locked it in the mail bag.

Then she went into the library and took down Fordham's "Toxicology" for a pleasant study.

SCENE VIII

VIVIENNE'S PLAN

When Lady Vivienne, after dinner on Friday, opened the door of the boudoir, her first glance fell on a man's hat, an ebony stick, and a black leather bag, placed upon a table before her. Closing the door, and turning slowly, she saw Dudley St. John seated in an easy posture with a book in his hand under the light of the shaded lamp.

She had made him understand that she regarded him as a fool, and he was anxious to show her that she mistook his character. But Lady Vivienne was not the kind of person to take a lesson from such as he.

"How did you come here?" she asked quietly.

He rose, and, taking the walking-stick from the table, unscrewed the gold top and showed that it contained eight or nine lengths of thin steel tube, telescoping one within the other in the manner of a Japanese fishing-rod. Then from the bag he produced an ingenious clutch with a knotted silk cord attached to it. He showed how the clutch screwed on to the top joint

of the rod and would, by pulling upon the cord, grip tightly on to a window-sill, so that a light man of ordinary agility might climb the cord with the assistance of the hanging rod to a window five and twenty feet from the ground.

"So you came in by the window?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Guessing it was my room by the tinted light on the blind?"

"I was in this room twenty-one years ago."

It was from this room he had taken the fatal jewel case.

"I never forget," he added sententiously.

"Ah; then you will remember this in the future; I prefer my visitors to enter by the door. Supposing my maid had come in by accident before me——"

"I should have said I was here by appointment."

"That would have compelled me to deny the fact, and give you into custody. With that machine in your possession your position would have been very awkward—for you."

St. John's face fell.

"Now, if you please," she continued, "go down the way you came up. Present yourself in the regular way, and I will see you."

St. John bottled his mortification, put on his hat, and took his bag and the machine to the window.

It was more necessary for Vivienne than for Cæsar's wife to be beyond suspicion; moreover, she wished to

put the man in his place, and bring home to his understanding that that place was a distinctly inferior one to her own.

Whilst he was preparing for descent, she went to her desk, and turning over some business cards in her address-book, chose one on which was printed—

"Mr. J. Robinson,
"Clithero and Hinks (solicitors),
"Gray's Inn."

She took this to St. John, who, screened by a curtain, stood at the open window buttoning his coat for the ignominious climb down.

"If you present this at the front door you will be admitted," she said, giving him the card. "Only be careful you are not caught before you get there, for I could not possibly save you."

And turning away to spare him further humiliation, she took up the book he had left under the lamp.

Shortly afterwards her maid brought up the card. She ordered "Mr. Robinson" to be shown into the library, and presently met him there.

"You are very late, Mr. Robinson," she said, seating herself.

He said something in apology as the servant withdrew from the room, and then sat down sullenly opposite Vivienne.

"You said in your letter there was nothing in the

world you would not do in return for my kindness—meaning, of course, for a price."

"The greater the service the greater the price," he replied, brightening up a little.

"Naturally," she said, drawing a purse from her pocket.

She found a key in the purse, with which she opened a drawer in the table before her. It contained business papers and books and some loose cash.

"Perhaps some of these will be useful for you to go on with," she said, picking out a few sovereigns and laying them on the table.

St. John snatched them up greedily—the first nuggets of an Eldorado, they seemed to him. Contrasting vividly with his excitement, Vivienne placidly opened a vellum-bound book and turned over a few pages.

"This is my father's diary," she said; "you will see under the date December 20 of last year, he wrote, 'Signed my will to-day.'" She passed over the book, and while he was examining the entry, she drew out a sheet of folded foolscap and opened it. "Here is a draft of the will," she pursued, handing the paper across the table. "Nothing could be more brief or explicit—Lord Rawton leaves all his personal property to me, his daughter, Vivienne Biron."

"How much might that amount to?" asked St. John, diffident and mystified.

"I will show you what the amount is in absolute hard cash," she replied, opening a bank-book. "There you will find the balance made up at his bankers' to the end of last month."

"Forty-six thousand two hundred and forty-five pounds eighteen and six," he read—"a tidy sum."

"Yes; thank you." She took back books and draft, replaced them in the drawer, locked it, and put back the key in her purse. "Well, I am prepared to offer you half that sum—roughly, twenty-five thousand pounds."

"Twenty-five thousand pounds!" he gasped.

"Yes; half my fortune," she replied, looking him straight in the eyes and marking the play of eager greed and bewilderment in them.

"On what condition?" he asked.

"That you help me to the possession of the other half within a week."

St. John pushed back his chair and regarded her in blank amazement—staggered by such a proposal even from "Lady Judas."

"He must die sooner or later," she said, with a shrug by way of explanation. "Life is mere misery to him."

"And you would put him out of his misery—like a dog?"

"Why not? If you shot a favourite dog or a horse from humanity, why should you deny the same act of charity to an old man?"

"There's something in that," he admitted, moistening and turning his tongue over in his mouth, parched with excitement.

Recovering from his astonishment, he said—

"It's a big order."

"It's a big price."

He acquiesced in this, and beginning to realize the position and measure his own risk in the business, said—

"You want him to be shot?"

"I think poison would be safer," said she, balancing a paper-knife reflectively.

"Oh, I don't understand anything about poisons," he said, shaking his head.

"I do," said she. "The difficulty is to get the stuff without risk of complication."

"I could do that—if you undertake the rest."

"Yes,"—still balancing the paper-knife reflectively.

"There's a man at Amsterdam deals in that sort of thing, and makes no inquiry," she pursued. "You could go by Harwich, and be back in a couple of days." She opened her purse again, and took out a slip of paper, which she handed across the table, saying, "That's the stuff."

He read: "Anhydrous Hydrocyanic Acid (H. C. N.)."

"Fifty grains will be ample," she said. "Will you get it?"

He was silent, the question of security—especially dear to those who deal in the insecurity of others—

presenting itself to his mind. Was it reasonable to suppose that any one would give £25,000 for a pinch of stuff that might be bought for a few pence? Did she deem him such an idiot as to believe that she intended to pay him half her fortune when it became hers? But it was difficult to hint his doubt of her honesty, though she was quite clever enough to perceive the cause of his hesitation. He saw that he must work round to the question, delicately, if possible.

"You are not afraid of the risk?" he asked.

"Not in the least. It is known that my father has meditated suicide for some time past. Besides, who could suspect me of parricide? What possible motive could they impute to me?"

The motive would have been still less apparent to St. John had he known that Rawton's money was lost.

"You never know what the d——d prosecution may not hatch out," said St. John. "And if anything did happen to you, who's to pay me?"

"The only security I care to offer you is this," replied she. "You can withdraw from the undertaking whenever you think it will not pay you to go on with it."

The flame of excitement flickered out with St. John's illusions. After all, then, it amounted simply to this: "Lady Judas" was willing to pay a good first-rate price for his services, and all this exhibition of deeds and accounts was merely to show him that

she was in a position to pay well. But it was hard to abandon at once the hope of winning a fortune.

"Is there nothing else you want done?" he asked, with a touch of dejection that amused Vivienne.

"There's another person who may have to be got rid of. But that's a minor affair and more in your way."

"At the risk of my neck?"

"That is quite optional. As I said, you are at liberty to withdraw whenever you find that the risk is not worth—£25,000."

"I should like to know something about the second job."

"I prefer to settle the other first. Will you get the stuff?"

He took the paper up from the table and read it with apathy—not a spark of excitement remaining. The whole thing was so clearly "Gas," the reality so far from illusion, that the balance between earning a few pounds and "chucking" altogether stood pretty even. That suggestion of another affair was too transparent a bait to be taken seriously. However, the "off chance" decided him.

"Yes; I'll do it," he said, rising and putting the paper into his waistcoat pocket. "You'll see me again in a day or two."

"Thanks; and please come in by the front door."

SCENE IX

ST. JOHN AT RAWTON HALL

Nothing in the Divine service was more edifying than Lady Vivienne's appearance and behaviour at Rawton Church. Her simple dress and humble bearing were a reproval to affluent parishioners who came to flaunt their finery in the sacred building. Her earnest devotion restrained young people from their tendency to undue levity. The tender solicitude with which she found text and lesson for her aged father inspired children with a sense of filial duty and parents with a desire to win such love and respect from their own offspring. Those who had only bent to pray now knelt when she sank on her knees. When she sang the whole congregation raised its voice in emulation; and her gold offering shamed the meanest to find a sixpence for the plate. The worthy rector confessed that her shining example did more to raise the pious tone of the parish than all his threats of hell fire. Before the church stood the beautiful horses champing their silver bits, the correctly cockaded and powdered footmen by the box of the landau, giving point to the

strict simplicity of the beautiful young lady in her plain lavender dress and black hat, gracefully accommodating her steps to the feeble pace of her frail old father, whose greatness was suggested to the uninitiated by a mysterious little rosette on the lappet of his coat.

Lady Vivienne had timed her going out with Mrs. Magister and Midge, and they stopped beyond the lych gate for a brief chat. Her darling father was so much better now that Lady Vivienne thought they might begin to entertain a little. And although the Hall seemed very dull now that her cousin had left them, she hoped her dear friends would come up and dine with them one evening. Had they any engagement for the ensuing week? No. Then would they come, say on Wednesday? Yes. How very sweet! And so they parted—Lady Vivienne stepping into the carriage, and gratifying the expectant group of curious loungers with a glimpse of wonderful shoe and silk stocking and foaming lace underskirt that sent them away marvelling the more at such a combination of outward modesty with inner magnificence.

"Yes; Wednesday evening," said Vivienne to herself, as she drew her skirts aside to make room for Rawton, with a smile as she pictured the preparation those two poor creatures at the Rectory would make for the function—"By Wednesday morning the old man ought to be as dead as Queen Anne."

When St. John presented himself on Monday morning at Rawton Hall he attempted no *coup de théâtre*, but sending in his name as Mr. Robinson, was shown into the library, where Lady Vivienne found him, hat in hand, stick and leather bag on a chair, and looking the picture of respectability.

Vivienne seated herself before the table and indicated a chair on the opposite side.

Seating himself, St. John took a small packet from his breast-pocket, and, handing it to her, said—

"That's it."

She removed the paper, and found a small wooden box labelled and carefully sealed. In silence she examined the inscription; the druggist's name and address stamped in the wax; then breaking the seal opened the box. It contained a small phial (again labelled and sealed) bedded in cotton-wool. She held it up to the light, regarding curiously this small quantity of colourless liquid that might destroy the life of the whole population of Rawton.

"Do you know Dr. Sturgess by sight?" she asked, carefully replacing the phial in the box.

"I should think I do; and he knows me. That makes it risky coming here in the daylight."

"I will think of that next time." She enveloped the box neatly in its paper covering, and putting it away in the drawer of her father's desk, asked St. John how he came to be known to Dr. Sturgess. St. John related the circumstances of their meeting.

"It may be necessary to get rid of him," she said, putting the key of the drawer in her purse.

St. John nodded. He did not care how many people she got rid of when he was clear of the place. He had laid the train, but had no desire to be within reach of the explosion. For that reason he watched the movement of Vivienne's fingers anxiously. Having the purse in her hand, he felt sure she intended to give him a "fiver" for his trouble and expenses in getting the acid.

She snapped her purse and slid it into her pocket, reading his thought and knowing that nothing but necessity would keep him to his work.

"It's a pity Dr. Sturgess knows you," said she; "it would have been far more convenient for you to lodge in the village until it is all over. As it is, you must stay here."

"Stay here!"

"Obviously. I may want you at any moment. You can't lodge in the village—you can't leave the house safely in daylight. Dr. Sturgess drops in frequently; he might meet you on the doorstep, and then what would you do? You are quite safe here. As Mr. Robinson from the London solicitors you can stay here with some papers before you during the morning. By the afternoon I will have two rooms prepared for you upstairs, where you can look at more papers. That will satisfy the curiosity of the servants. The rooms shall be on the first-floor, so that at night time,

with that machine,"—she indicated his portable scaling apparatus—"you can go out and come in as you please."

It was so evident that he might go out and never come back again if he chose, that she felt it unnecessary to intimate the option in so many words.

"There are some papers," she continued, setting some bundles of documents before him. "Your rooms shall be prepared at once, and lunch shall be served to you there." With that she inclined her head slightly and left him to his own savage reflections.

The next morning she found him in his sitting-room on the first-floor fairly reconciled to the inevitable. He was comfortably lodged, well fed, and provided with a box of excellent cigars and a novel, the position was not so bad for one who had been inured to solitary confinement by twenty-one years in Dartmoor and Portland prisons. His only duty was to seat himself at the table under the window and pore over his papers when he heard footsteps in the corridor. And hope was beginning to revive. "Lady Judas" was such an extraordinary person that it was quite possible she would fulfil her promise, and share the plunder fairly and squarely when she had it; if not—some very pretty plans of vengeance were ranging through his mind on that subject.

"When is it coming off?" he asked, after Vivienne had assured herself that he had all he required.

"I can't tell you. I am waiting for a favourable opportunity. Did you go out last night?"

"Had a look round."

"If you go out to-night it would be advisable to have a look round at Rawton Mill. If Dr. Sturgess is not satisfied with the explanation I give him of my father's death we shall have to silence him. Do you understand?"

"Yes. He'll have to be poisoned."

"Oh dear, no! That would be suicidal. Two, close together, poisoned in the same week! What are you thinking about?"

"How is it to be done, then?"

"I leave that entirely to you. That is why I thought you would do well to look about you and see what opportunity the mill offers for a sure and speedy death."

"She wants to choke me off," said St. John, when she left him. "I see through her. She's got the poison and wants me to hook it. That's why she's put me on this floor and given me power to bolt. That's why she's putting off her job. That's why she may find it necessary to do for Sturgess before she planks down the money. Thinks to frighten me, but she won't. I'll do for Sturgess if she insists, though it's only to show her I'm not to be bested."

And with this idea fixed in his mind, he spent several hours between midnight and dawn in the close examination of the mill both inside and out.

But Vivienne could tell the truth to serve her purpose, and actually was waiting for a favourable opportunity to murder Rawton. She reckoned that she could afford to wait four days—about the limit she set upon St. John's patience. There was no need of haste; but every call for prudence and foresight. She set herself to secure not only victory, but the means of safe retreat in case of defeat. To this end she packed a trunk with clothing carefully wedged round a case containing her diamonds and trinkets, locked and strapped the trunk, which was addressed to "Mrs. Harcourt, Cloak Room, Liverpool-street Station. To be called for," and dispatched it on Monday evening. That done, she carried Rawton's travelling case into her own room, and in the night took out an empty perfume bottle, gummed a tiny label upon it, and let fall into it a single drop of acid from the bottle procured by St. John. Then she locked up the case in her wardrobe, and the acid in a secret drawer of her writing-desk, and, after a cigarette and a chapter of "Gyp," slept very well until her maid brought a cup of coffee in the morning.

On this day—Tuesday—that favourable occasion for which Vivienne was prepared to wait a week presented itself, and as frequently happens in the events of life, the occasion was unexpected and outside the range of her calculations.

Rawton, whose health had improved vastly with a congenial occupation and daily exercise in the open air,

left the Hall in high spirits soon after breakfast, taking with him his notebooks, his standard rule, a box of sandwiches, and a flask of sherry. He hoped to knock off that item of gate-posts in the course of the day, and, if Vivienne would excuse him, he would not come back for lunch. When they met at the dinner-table, Vivienne saw at once that something had occurred to cast a shadow over the poor old man's mind. The jubilant satisfaction which had lately enlivened his face was gone, and in its place appeared deep dejection and self-reproach. The night before, he could talk of nothing but his day's doings, and wearied Vivienne with the details of his petty triumphs over the obstructive Simmonds. To-night he avoided the subject altogether, and, with a feeble attempt at diversion, raked up one after the other those tedious old stories which had served so long to season dinner conversation.

What had happened Vivienne determined to find out in the course of the evening, to wheedle the old man into confession in the usual way.

But, as if foreseeing the painful humiliation, Rawton pleaded fatigue, and leaving Vivienne at the door of the drawing-room went up to his own chamber.

Vivienne threw herself in a chair, and with her hands clasped at the back of her head speculated on the cause of this sudden change in Rawton's manner. Her suspicions were directed against Dr. Sturgess and

Dudley St. John. Had they been tampering with the old man to further their own ends or frustrate hers? These misgivings were abruptly broken by a servant, who came with an air of suppressed secrecy to say that Mr. Simmonds was waiting in the library, and wanted to see her alone if she could conveniently give an interview.

Vivienne crossed at once to the library, where the agent was walking up and down, hands behind him, in evident anxiety.

"You will pardon my intrusion at this time," he began, "but anxiety on his lordship's account——"

"That is every excuse. Something has clearly happened to disturb my dear father's mind. Pray tell me what it is."

"I am sorry to say I lost patience this afternoon over some trumpery discussion that irritated me, and rather brusquely intimated to his lordship that the difference of a few shillings more or less in the estimate of expenses covering nearly two thousand pounds could not affect the result practically either way."

"You have pointed this out before."

"When I first laid the estimate before his lordship. But he then seemed quite incapable of comprehending the matter, but this afternoon his intellect appeared to be more lucid than usual, and he grasped the fact at once; it came as a revelation to him, I think. Instead of showing anger, he said quite kindly, 'You are quite right, Simmonds, to point this out,' and he then

requested me to show him the books. We went together to the lodge, and I explained matters fully. That compelled me to show him, that unless a considerable reduction is made in the rents we shall lose two of our best tenants at Michaelmas. Here again he astonished me by his clear perception. Instead of bothering about petty details, he took the sum total into consideration and saw the true position of affairs. 'What am I to do?' he said, turning to me with a look of terror; 'how am I to meet expenditures and reduce rentals?' 'Only by drawing on your capital, my lord,' said I.

"'Capital!' he exclaimed, 'I have none. All is lost—all!' I ventured to suggest that Shipton Manor House might be let. 'What then?' said he. 'Add a hundred or two to the rental of those beggardly farms, and you give me an income of less than a thousand a year. I have never spent less than five.' Once more I ventured to hint that a thousand a year, if we could raise it, was not a contemptible income. 'It is penury to me,' he said."

"He was thinking of me," said Vivienne. "A hundred a year would meet my dear father's requirements."

"He never mentioned your ladyship's name, not once. But now you speak of it I can understand how he would feel for your sake at the prospect of selling up the place and all that. It would account for the awful look in his face when he left me."

"What look?" asked Vivienne in a tone of simplest wonder.

"Well, it's hard to tell you, but as I came up here with that purpose, I must not keep it back. The fact is," he continued, turning his hat round in his hand and glancing down at it with raised eyebrows, then looking up in rapid action—"There was a look in his lordship's face as if he might do something desperate to escape the coming trouble."

"Do you mean he might destroy himself?" gasped Vivienne in agonized dismay.

Simmonds, clenching his lips together, nodded.

"That could not make my position better."

"No, but it would spare him the terrible mortification of seeing you brought down."

Should she give way to an outburst of grief or should she bear up nobly? Vivienne asked herself. She decided that the latter would be the more artistic attitude.

"My father, Lord Rawton, is not a coward," she said, with quiet dignity; "but I thank you, Mr. Simmonds, for your solicitude on his behalf." She bowed to him, and he was about to withdraw when, as if an afterthought had occurred to her, she said, "May I ask if you will pass Rawton Mill?"

"I intended to look in there on my way home."

"Will you be good enough to ask Dr. Sturgess to call to-morrow morning? My dear father is sure to pass a sleepless night. You might tell the good doctor

what you have told me that he may know how to approach him. Dr. Sturgess has so much tact and kindness where real suffering has to be allayed. Good night, Mr. Simmonds."

Rawton's hours were numbered now.

SCENE X

THE DEATH OF LORD RAWTON

About eleven, when the household slept, Vivienne went upstairs and stood listening at the door of Rawton's room. All was silent within. Noiselessly she opened the door and looked in. The old man was sitting within the zone of light reflected from the lamp upon the table, his thin fingers knitted on his knee, his shrunk figure bent, his eyes fixed upon a scrap of paper lying on the table, the expression of his face and the attitude indicative of profound despair. But there was no weapon at hand to show that he meditated self-destruction; the unlocked door showed Vivienne that he had passed through that stage, just as the scrap of paper in place of a multitude of documents, summing up his position, proved that his mind had grown clear and stronger under pressure. Well, if he wouldn't do it she must.

"Shall I bring you a cup of coffee, darling?" she asked, laying her hand on his shoulder and glancing down at the figures. She saw their nature, and was gratified to think how all things combined to serve her purpose.

Rawton started at the unexpected sound of her voice. Then taking her hand in his, and smoothing it gently, he answered—

"I fear it will make me wakeful, love." His tone was quite calm. "And I should like to have a good night—a long, long sleep."

There was a play upon words in the construction Vivienne intended to be put upon that desire.

"Will you take a small dose of the sedative Dr. Sturgess sent?"

"Anything you like to give me, love," he answered, pressing her hand to his lips.

"It is in my room. I will fetch it, darling."

She left him for a few moments and returned with the bottle of sleeping mixture and a glass. The glass looked empty; only close examination would have shown a drop of liquid at the bottom.

She measured a dose of the mixture into the glass, holding it up to the light. The stuff was unchanged in colour, but a perceptible odour of burnt almonds came from it.

Rawton rose, and, taking the glass, held her hand in his as he raised the vessel to his lips. For an instant he paused, scenting the unusual odour, and turned his eyes upon Vivienne; then with a smile of assurance he tossed it off. Again he turned his eyes upon her. God knows what accusing spirit smote her through them, but she could not stand their strange regard. She turned her head aside as she took the

empty glass from his hand. She felt his fingers tightening upon her hand, and snatching it away she went to the window, lifted the blind, and looked out—having a horror of unpleasant scenes.

A dull thud upon the floor reached her ear, and then the shuffling sound of a body writhing upon the carpet, with heavy breathing in short, convulsive sobs.

Now all was still, the awful silence struck greater horror to her heart than the throbs of the dying man, who had loved her and cared for her as few fathers would.

Presently she turned. He lay under the light of the lamp upon the floor, his knees cramped up, his arms fixed at right angles, his face turned towards her, the lips firmly closed, the eyes wide open fixed upon her.

She left him there, taking with her the bottle of sedative and the glass.

In her own room she carefully washed the glass in one basin of water after the other and put the sedative with the long array of drugs and cosmetics in her closet. Then she returned with infinite precaution against observation to Rawton's room, carrying in her hand his travelling dressing-case. As she had left the dead body so she found it, eyes staring, knees cramped, arms at right angles, fixed in the rigor of death.

She placed the dressing-case open on the table, beside the paper with a few figures upon it; the empty perfume bottle she laid against his hand, the

gold stopper a pace or two from it. Then she went to the door, and listened attentively for some seconds. There was no sound save the faint, slow ticking of a clock in the hall below. Then, stepping into the corridor, she explored every corner with her eyes. Satisfied that all was right without she turned within to see that nothing had been overlooked; no, all was as it should be. She drew to the door, her last glance falling on the dead man lying under the light of the lamp with staring eyes.

Silently she locked the door and slid the thin Bramah key under the door. From her room she fetched a long paper-knife and pushed the key still further into the room. The night's work was done.

* * * * *

Dr. Sturgess had scarcely finished his breakfast when a cart dashed up to the mill and a groom, breathless with excitement, ran into the workshop where he sat.

"Something dreadful has happened at the Hall, doctor. Lord Rawton's locked himself in his room. They've knocked and knocked, and called and called, but can't get an answer, and now they're breaking the door open, and the mistress has sent me to fetch you."

Dr. Sturgess snatched up a hat without a word, hurried down with the groom, and was presently rattling over the ground towards the Hall.

A group of servants stood at the entrance when he reached the house, eagerly awaiting him—"with

what earthly purpose?" he wondered, reading the irrevocable in their scared faces; "do they expect me to bring him back to life?"

"He is dead, sir!" they whispered, as he ran up the steps.

"Where?"

"In his room, sir."

Putting them aside, he ran up the stairs and pushed back the half-open door, the lock hanging loose upon the splintered wood—and then paused upon the threshold, spell-bound by the tragic picture before him.

Vivienne had suffered no one but herself to approach Rawton's body, and had cleared the room the moment it was known that he was dead. Nothing had been moved; the awed household had left the room as they found it. Now there was neither sound nor movement. The blinds had not been raised; the lamp still burned upon the table; the mingled light was sepulchral in its effect. Cramped and rigid, Rawton in his evening-dress lay staring with glassy eyes towards the window. But to the doctor's eye the more tragic figure was Vivienne. Seated in a deep lounge-chair, her body thrown back, her arms extended along the elbows of the chair, her bare feet stretched out and crossed before her, she looked in that half light like some angel of Death, as, immovable, she gazed down at the lifeless figure on the floor. As she had come from her room at the first summons she sat there,

loosely clad in a dark dressing-gown. Every detail had been carefully studied to delude the doctor. The semblance of self-abandonment in the presence of overwhelming disaster completely deceived him. The pathos of this worldly woman yielding to affection went straight to his heart, and struck him with remorse for having doubted the sincerity of her love for Rawton. He knelt for a moment beside the body to assure himself that life was extinct, and then rising turned from the dead to the living. Vivienne had risen from the chair.

"What can I do?" she asked hoarsely.

"For him, nothing. He is beyond our help. This is no place for you. Come with me."

He led her from the room into the corridor. Should she break down here? She thought the apathy of despair more suitable to the occasion. To divert her thoughts by some occupation, he suggested that when she was dressed she should meet him in the morning-room to settle certain questions that pressed for immediate discussion.

"A telegram must be sent at once to Mr. Biron," he said. "I will take it with me when I go."

"Poor Valentine! He loved my dear father——" the words seemed to choke her, and she passed into her room quickly, covering her face with her hands.

With a heavy step Dr. Sturgess returned to Rawton's chamber. The whole story lay there to be unmistakably read by the simplest observer. The broken

lock, the shining key upon the floor, the burning lamp, the paper with Rawton's pencil-case beside it, as he had laid it down after the brief summing-up of his ruin, the open dressing-case, and the empty flacon on the floor close to the body. He picked up the bottle, and, seeing a label upon it, held it up to the light, and read the three letters neatly written in Roman capitals, "H. C. N." He raised it to his nostril, though it was scarcely necessary to verify the symbol, and jerked his head comprehensively.

A timid cough drew his attention to where a servant stood in embarrassment.

"If you please, sir," said the man in a hushed voice, when Dr. Sturgess approached, "the policeman has come and wishes to see you."

"Send him up to me," said the doctor.

The constable came up. The lodge-keeper had told him how Rawton had been found dead, and he thought it right to see if he was wanted.

"Yes; get out your notebook and write down what you can see as I point out the particulars."

The doctor pointed out the salient facts, and then dismissed him, with instructions to communicate at once with the coroner. Then he extinguished the lamp, drew the door to, and went down to the morning-room, glad to have got the man out of the way in Vivienne's absence.

Breakfast was laid upon the table. The doctor helped himself to a cup of tea, and, bending over it,

pondered a problem that must be solved before Vivienne joined him. A very serious and difficult task had to be done, and there were two ways of doing it. One was roundabout and evasive; the other straightforward and decisive. The doctor decided in favour of the latter course, and scarcely was the resolution taken when Vivienne entered the room.

ACT III

SCENE I

THE DOCTOR'S SECRET

Vivienne had required very little "making up" for the part she was now to play—which was that of resignation and fortitude—but that little was artistic and calculated to hit the conventional taste of an old fogey like Dr. Sturgess. There was just a little colouring on the eyelids to suggest a recent attack of weeping; but her face was left sallow and her lips livid. Her lavender dress had again been brought into requisition, but its severe simplicity was unrelieved by ribbon or lace or any kind of ornament.

She dismissed the servant, and, seating herself at the table, attempted to help herself to tea; but her fingers trembled so helplessly that she turned to Dr. Sturgess with a piteous shrug and an affecting expression in her poor eyes.

He filled her cup—silent with pity—and then looking round the table said—

"There are all sorts of good things here, but I fancy a little dry toast will be most to your taste."

She accepted the offer with a faint smile of

recognition, and set herself to the duty of eating. During the weary and lengthy process the doctor looked over the odd collection of papers from his pocket, and, finding a blank piece, laid it on the table with a pencil.

"I suppose some sort of official inquiry will be necessary?" said Vivienne, breaking silence as she put aside her plate.

"Undoubtedly there will be a Coroner's inquest. Possibly it will be held here."

"When?"

"On Friday in all probability. Mr. Biron—Lord Rawton, as we must now learn to call him—should be present, if we can find him. But his presence is not indispensable."

The blow was so unexpected that Vivienne had not time to suppress a look of consternation. She had taken it for granted that he had gone back to his books and Bloomsbury, and in that belief expected him to be at her side in a few hours, ripe for the *coup de théâtre* she had prepared, and ready (now that his affair with Midge was broken off) to take pity on her in her tribulation, and offer that support which she could only accept as his wife.

Happily Dr. Sturgess was now writing, and her alarm was unseen by him.

"He is a man," murmured the doctor as he wrote —"needn't mince words with him—three words and the address will do."

"I thought you expressed a doubt as to his address?"

"A letter would have found him there up to Monday night," he said, putting the telegram he had sketched for her approval before her, "but whether he is there now I can't say."

She read—

"To Valentine Biron, Poste Restante, Monaco.—Rawton is dead."

In dead silence she bowed over the paper, and read the words over and over again. That address heightened her alarm almost to the degree of dismay. What was Valentine doing at Monaco? Why had he given her no intimation of his going or his purpose? She knew the doctor's eyes were upon her ready to read her thoughts if she betrayed them. He indeed noted the expression of her nostrils and lips; but those signs of perturbation were only natural and not unforeseen.

"You think it sounds too brusque," he suggested.

"No," still poring over the paper.

"Then with your permission I will ring the bell and send it down to the post at once."

"Certainly."

When the servant had taken the telegram and they were again alone, Vivienne asked—

"Do you know why Valentine went to Monaco?"

"Yes; he went to see if any trace could be found of Rawton's lost fortune."

"Is it possible that I should overlook any possible clue?"

"You only suspected, as I understood, that he lost his money at Monte Carlo. If it can be shown that he did not lose it there, clearly the right clue has been overlooked."

"If I tell you that I know it was lost there?"

"Had you told him that he would probably have declined to question the fact."

She turned her shoulder from him to hide the mortification that gnawed at her heart, saying, as an explanation for her evident displeasure—

"I think he should have told me of his intention."

"I take the responsibility of his silence upon myself; he went solely at my instigation." After a pause of some moments he continued, "You may ask what reason I have to interfere in the matter."

"I might also ask what business it is of Valentine's, since the loss affects me, and me only."

"Pardon me, it affected the late Lord Rawton more than any one, as the terrible event of the past night has shown. The recovery, in time, of the lost money would certainly have saved his life. Consideration of his uncle's welfare and also of yours was a sufficient justification for leaving no stone unturned which might reveal the truth."

"Oh yes, yes, yes!—I am wicked to forget that. Oh, forgive me!" she cried, clasping her hands with

recollection of the part she had to play—if the piece were yet to be saved.

"Anything may be forgiven you at such a time as this," said the doctor; "I must point out, however, that quite apart from the consideration of his uncle's and your welfare, the recovery of this fortune involves other interests."

"You mean that my darling father has incurred debts which his income from the estate would not meet. Let me tell you, Dr. Sturgess, that my father's debts will be paid to the last farthing. My jewels have been sent to London to be sold. With the money they realize I intended to relieve my poor darling's difficulties; they cannot bring him back to me (choking with grief), but they shall hallow his memory" (with queenly dignity).

Dr. Sturgess bowed reverently at this noble instance of filial pride.

"And if, when all are sold," continued Vivienne, following up a scene already rehearsed for representation when Valentine appeared, "the last souvenir of my poor darling gone, there remains after the paying of his debts sufficient to keep me from want" (emotion too deep for words here).

"My dear young lady, not a trinket shall be sold, nor a souvenir be lost——"

"You mean that my cousin, my dear, generous Valentine, has already cleared the debt."

"I mean," said Dr. Sturgess, just a little nettled by

the interruption, when he was doing his utmost to keep to his course and peg steadily onward to the end he had in view—"I mean nothing of the kind. You will not have to sell your jewels because the debt is not your father's, and you need not trouble your head about the loss of Rawton's fortune, because it would never have been yours, and you will never come to want while your grandmother keeps her money in the Bank of England."

"What are you saying!" she exclaimed, a real terror lending force to her assumed astonishment.

"What I am saying is no paradox, but the mere truth which I am compelled to reveal by the force of circumstances. The truth must have come out sooner or later. Had Midge Magister consented to be Valentine Biron's wife, the truth must have come out then. For the happiness of all concerned it should not have come out, through me, while Lord Rawton lived. Now that he is dead, in common justice it can no longer be kept secret. The dead man upstairs was not your father."

"Then who is his daughter?" she asked, pretending incredulity.

"Midge Magister."

"And perhaps you can tell me who I am?" she said, with the same able appearance of contemptuous disbelief.

"I am sorry to tell you that you are the daughter of a very worthless person named Dudley St. John."

"And you expect me to believe this story?"

"Not without proof. You are quite welcome to believe me mad; for your own sake I must convince you that, mad or not, I am telling you nothing but the truth. To begin with I must show you how the transposition came about. Lady Rawton was dying from the effects of giving birth to her daughter—the real Vivienne; and your mother, who, by the way, was as good and lovable a woman as ever lived—was taken by me to the Hall as a nurse for the newborn child. Your father, just out of gaol, came here to get money out of his poor little wife. He got into a room upstairs, and there in a moment of mad exasperation and fear he stuck a knife into the child, whose cries threatened to betray his presence. He escaped, and your mother came in horror to me to save the life of the wounded child. The child's life hung on a thread. If it died your father would be caught and hanged to a certainty. Your mother implored my secrecy, offering to give up her own child to save her husband. I consented, whether wisely or not is a question which does not affect the issue; the wounded daughter of Lord Rawton was taken to the Vicarage, and you were brought to the Hall. Lady Rawton died, and Lord Rawton soon after returned to St. Petersburg, taking you and your mother—who naturally wished to keep near you—with him, and leaving his child still in a precarious condition in my charge. The child grew well and strong. Your mother died in St. Petersburg; your father was

again in prison, this time for life, on account of another crime."

"I don't think I need hear any more of this remarkable history."

"Are you convinced that it is true?"

"Not at all."

"What purpose do you think I can have in telling a falsehood—a falsehood moreover that may involve me in very serious consequences?"

"That is a matter of perfect indifference to me."

"If you need further proof you will find it in the real Vivienne's arm—a long scar upon the upper side of the arm here, a shorter one on the under side. Your father's knife ran through the biceps. Two women in the village knew that Mrs. St. John's child was mysteriously wounded, and both maintain that before the 'accident' the child's eyes were black and became blue after."

"If this is true," said she, finding the attitude of incredulity no longer tenable, "you have placed me in a very terrible position."

"Your position is not more terrible than it would have been had I proclaimed the fact, which would have hanged your father. You have——" He checked himself abruptly.

"Much to thank you for," she said, completing his unfinished sentence. "Why do you pause?"

"Because I have no wish to justify my own conduct."

"And believe you may safely leave your justification to my intelligence. You might tell me that beyond regard for my mother and Lord Rawton you took my own welfare into your consideration. You foresaw that no one would come forward to claim the child of a murderer; and that coming from the workhouse with that hereditary taint, I stood in a fair way to follow in my father's steps to the gallows. That by your silence you gave me the benefit of a father's care, of education and surroundings which placed me beyond the temptations of evil, suppressing the bad and fostering the good tendencies of my disposition. You have done all that was possible to make me a good woman. I see that—yet God knows the worst could not be more unhappy than I." She buried her face in her hands, and gulped down the rising sobs.

Dr. Sturgess looked at her in mute perturbation under his shaggy eyebrows as he passed his hand round the back of his neck.

"The man I loved as my father, dead. The man I hoped to wed, alienated," she continued, rocking her bowed figure, her hands still clasped to her face. "Oh, I know now why he left so suddenly without one parting word—he knew I was not his cousin—he knew my shameful origin."

"I give you my word of honour he has not heard a word of your history from my lips."

"No; but before he left he called on Mrs. Magister —she told him."

"Neither Mrs. Magister nor Midge knows more than he. Your own father, Dudley St. John, is ignorant of the fact. No one in the world knows the secret save you and I."

That was precisely what she had set herself to discover. It gave her the one last chance.

"But," continued the doctor, "I must tell Valentine what I have told you when we meet."

"So be it," she sobbed, in her resignation. And rising, she cast up her eyes to heaven, and walked from the room.

Was it that look to heaven which gave away the show—the melodramatic touch which conveyed an impression of overacting and upset the realistic effect? Certain it is that for many minutes Dr. Sturgess sat where "Lady Judas" had left him in silent cogitation. Suddenly he rose from his seat and walked quietly upstairs to Rawton's room; then he opened the door and looked attentively at the lock hanging by one screw to the splintered wood, after that he picked up the shining key from the floor, slipped it in his pocket, and, having closed the door again, descended the stairs and left the Hall.

SCENE II

THE CAT'S-PAW

"Lady Judas" also took a long spell of cogitation after her interview with Dr. Sturgess. Two courses lay open to her. The first was to leave Rawton Hall and take the train to London, leaving Cromeby at one o'clock to claim the box containing her possessions at Liverpool Street, go thence to Harwich, and cross by the night service to Rotterdam. This she might do with probable immunity from any risk whatever. Dr. Sturgess would be the first to whom her flight would be communicated. To him, convinced of her innocence, it would seem natural enough that she should leave the home which was no longer hers, to escape the degradation of being known to Valentine and the Magisters as the daughter of Dudley St. John, and sooner or later being thrust out of Rawton with mortifying pity.

The other course was to play the game out to the end for the higher stake she had set herself to win. At the present moment no living creature save Dr. Sturgess knew that she was not Lady Vivienne Biron. If he could be silenced she felt reasonably sure that

when Valentine arrived she could so work upon his pity and affection that he would make her his wife. And when she had secured the position and title she aspired to she could find the lost fortune and live happy ever after. But for the success of this scheme it was indispensable that Dr. Sturgess should be put out of the way for good, and all before Valentine returned. This was a risky undertaking. To serve him as she had served Rawton was not practicable. The feeble, trusting old man had fallen an easy victim; the sturdy and suspicious doctor would know as much about poison as she, and perhaps more. Besides, to kill two men by poison almost at the same time and place was quite out of the question. No; some other means of destroying Sturgess must be found, and some other destroyer. That destroyer must be Dudley St. John. If he declined to play his part, then she would take the safer and less profitable course without further hesitation.

Having arrived at this determination "Lady Judas" assured herself that Dr. Sturgess was no longer in the house, and then entered the room where Dudley St. John was smoking a cigar before his table, on which were the documents he was supposed to be working at. She put the window wide open—the reek of tobacco destroying the peculiar charm of a lavender gown.

"Well, you've done it," he whispered, with a sardonic grin.

She nodded.

"I heard 'em calling him and breaking the door open, and I knew what had happened. Besides, I saw you at his window last night. That would be awkward if I were called as a witness, wouldn't it?" he asked, with a malicious chuckle.

"Not at all. Every one in the house knows that I go into my father's room every night before going to my own. You were on your way to Rawton Mill when you saw me, I suppose?"

He nodded with a leer of self-satisfaction which she was glad to perceive.

"Did you get in?" she asked.

"Easy as Pat," he replied; "went all over the blooming show from top to bottom. Spent a couple of most entertaining hours there. Heard the old man snoring in his room—right up at the top. He's been here this morning, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Is it all right?"

"You never know," she replied, with a shrug. "The inquest will be held here to-morrow or the next day."

"Oh!"

"And so you had better go some time to-day."

"Go! Where to?"

"Wherever you like; it doesn't matter to me."

"Oh, don't it?"

His look was now less self-complacent.

"Not the least in the world."

"Oh, I'm to go, eh? now you don't want anything more out of me! But how about the swag? Have you forgotten that we were to go halves?"

"Oh no; you were to have one-half when you had put me in possession of the other. Well, the inquest has to be held, a satisfactory verdict given, and the will proved before I shall receive a farthing."

"In the mean time, what am I to do?"

"The same as I—wait and hope."

"Oh, well, I can wait and hope just as well here as elsewhere."

"Do you think so? The servants will be pretty closely questioned; and when it comes out that a Mr. Robinson has been staying in the house for the past few days, some juryman is sure to want to know who you are."

"What shall *you* say to that?"

"Simply that you presented yourself as the representative of my father's solicitors. The servants will say the same thing. There you are!"

"Well, who's to know that I am not? The servants don't know me."

"There's one person who knows you very well indeed, and that's Dr. Sturgess."

St. John's chin dropped, and his colour went.

"If I were you," continued "Lady Judas," profiting by his discomfiture, "I should get out of the country as soon as possible."

"Do you mean that suspicion will fall upon me?" he gasped.

"Undoubtedly. Dr. Sturgess will tell that this is not the first time you have entered the house with felonious purpose. I should certainly go soon, for it's pretty certain a warrant for your apprehension will be issued, and possibly to-morrow."

"Go! Where am I to go without money? I have none."

"Nor I, either. I gave you all my loose money, you remember, before you went to Holland."

He did not believe that; but how was he to force money from her? She was not under his thumb; he was under hers. That promise of enormous reward had always seemed to him too good to be true; it looked more illusory than ever now. She was playing the fool with him, using him as a cat's-paw. She had got the poison through him safely, and had not paid too dearly for his trouble and expense in procuring it. And now, having served her, he might go. She wanted him out of the way, and had no more intention of paying him now than flying to the moon.

Nothing would have pleased him better than to strangle her on the spot—nothing, save to turn the tables on her and torture her slowly as she was torturing him. A hopeful idea gleamed dimly in his mind.

"Supposing I confess the truth—telling how I

bought the poison at Amsterdam, and all that?" he said, with an assumption of superior cunning.

"That will prove how Lord Rawton came to be poisoned, and will be rather bad for you. You cannot really be so senseless as to believe for one moment that a jury will convict me of parricide upon the mere accusation of a professional murderer. The very accusation would damn you at once."

He looked at her in silence, with fiendish malevolence, finding himself beaten at all points, and powerless to retaliate. It now dawned upon him that she had kept him in the house with no other purpose than to draw suspicion on him in the event of doubt arising as to the suicide of Rawton.

"Is this a trap?" he asked, clenching his hands as if he would spring upon her.

"If it is, the door is open for your escape," she replied coolly, seating herself as if in contempt of his menacing attitude.

"Escape? I shall be collared before the warrant's a day old," he muttered, his thoughts going back to his last attempt to escape from this accursed Hall.

"You should know whether flight is practicable or not better than I—with your experience."

"I stand a better chance staying here."

"Then the other is poor enough," she said, with a little jerk of the head as she looked at her foot swaying to and fro beneath the hem of her dress.

"If I had money I could get away fast enough.

Couldn't you let me have ten pounds?" he whined, changing his front completely.

"I can't let you have ten shillings."

"But you want me to get out of the way."

"No, I don't. You are welcome to stay here as long as it suits you."

"Ah, you think I shall be safer back at Dartmoor, I suppose. That won't cost you anything, eh?"

"No. At the same time I don't see why you need go back to Dartmoor."

"You've taken precious good pains to show me that all the roads lead there."

"Merely a friendly act on my part to warn you of your danger—to point out what must certainly happen if you can do nothing but sit here smoking cigars all day, and prowl about all night to no purpose."

"Well, what else am I do?" he asked, after a minute's vain searching in his mind for an alternative.

"I don't think I ever knew a man of your class quite so obtuse," she remarked with a contemptuous shrug, after looking him in the face for a few minutes in silence.

"It's these damned smokes!" he exclaimed, flinging the half-smoked cigar out of the window. "If there's a way out I wish you would show it me." His tone was quite humble now.

"Why, you yourself pointed out just now that no one in the place knows you except Dr. Sturgess. If he were out of the way who would question your

presence here as an accountant employed to examine my father's papers. Mr. Biron, who will probably be at the inquest, himself suggested that an accountant should be called in."

St. John wondered that this had not occurred to him, but his fatuous vanity and natural mistrust prevented him giving "Lady Judas" credit for unselfishness in the suggestion.

"Oh, that's it—you want to get rid of Dr. Sturgess?"

"Not more than you do. If you remember, I intimated from the very first that you might have to get rid of him." She rose and went towards the door. "I will see you again in the afternoon, unless you think it advisable to make your escape at once. Be careful, however. Dr. Sturgess is sure to come again. There are lots of details to be arranged. And possibly the coroner, with a constable or two, will call in the afternoon."

With this and a careless nod she left St. John to serious reflection.

Miss Judas left him severely alone until the evening, notwithstanding her anxiety with regard to the issue. She felt it necessary to keep the upper hand by maintaining her attitude of indifference.

The news of Lord Rawton's tragic ending had spread like wildfire. A very sweet letter of sympathy came from Mrs. Magister and Midge to Vivienne, with an invitation to make their house her home. There

were many callers who left their cards. She replied to the letter from the Rectory by a short but equally sweet note, saying that she felt she must stay with her dead darling till he was taken to the grave. But she saw no one save Dr. Sturgess and the coroner, who called in the afternoon. The coroner considered the case so self-evident and simple that the necessary formalities could be got through very quickly, and arrangements might safely be made for the funeral to take place any time after Friday. Dr. Sturgess saw the body laid out in the room where Rawton fell, and suggested that arrangements for the funeral should be left open for a few days, in the hope that the present Lord Rawton might return, and there the interview ended. These small events scarcely broke the monotonous suspense for "Lady Judas," and it gave her immense relief when the servants who carried dinner to St. John returned to say that Mr. Robinson preferred Burgundy to claret with his meal.

"You intend to do it, then?" she said, when she again entered his room.

"I shouldn't be here now otherwise," he answered morosely.

"I have heard that Burgundy steadies some persons' nerves—it doesn't suit me. How shall you proceed?"

"That's my business."

"I merely ask in case you might require a weapon. I can let you have an excellent revolver if you need it."

"With Rawton's crest on it, I dare say, in case I should be caught. Oh, you *are* a devil!"

"Well, I'm glad to find that you are not quite such a fool as you seemed this morning," she replied for an exit.

SCENE III

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

Between ten and eleven St. John, with all due precautions, approached Rawton Hill. In the adjacent cottage, inhabited by the doctor's servant, Parke, no light was to be seen; but there was a strong light on the first-floor of the mill itself which perplexed St. John. It was used as a workshop, he knew; having a turn for mechanics the various appliances had interested him considerably in the course of his investigations, but at this hour the previous night it was in darkness, and the doctor snoring peacefully in his bed on the top floor. What was he doing there? he wondered.

His curiosity increased as his patience wore out, and after waiting a quarter of an hour in the hope of seeing the light extinguished, he resolved to find out what was going on in there. There was little difficulty and not much danger in the venture. The lower gallery (used formerly for trimming the mill sails) ran round the first-floor, and was not above ten feet from the ground. With his scaling apparatus he could

mount easily to the gallery and descend as easily in case of emergency. The night was admirably dark.

Choosing the most favourable point for his purpose, he drew out four lengths of his tubular stick, attached the clutch and silk cord to the end, and quietly gripped the rail fencing the gallery. In a very few minutes he stood upon the platform. An acetylene gasometer fixed against the wall near one of the windows served as an excellent screen and enabled him to get a full view of the interior.

The doctor, in an artisan's bibbed apron, sat at a bench adjusting something in a box under the brilliant white light of an acetylene gas jet. Something there evidently failed to fit to his liking. Presently he removed a screw, delicately unscrewed a nut, and drew out the steel arbor. Then he rose, brought the arbor to his lathe, and carefully chucked it. The lathe stood before the very window through which St. John was looking. As he stood there manipulating the chuck his great head was not two yards distant. It would have been the surest and easiest thing in the world to put a bullet into that great square forehead, and bitterly St. John regretted that he had declined the offer of a good revolver made by Miss Judas. Why in two seconds, just the time to take careful aim and draw the trigger, the job would have been done. Assuredly a man may ruin his finest chances by being too clever!

With this mortifying reflection St. John watching

the doctor standing, tool in hand, almost motionless before the lathe, and then his attention was suddenly directed to the scrunching of wheels on the newly mended road that passed the mill. A vehicle of some sort was ascending the hill.

St. John, with stealthy tread, moved round the gallery to a point commanding the approach. The light of a carriage-lamp shimmered through the hedge by the roadside, came fully into sight at the open gateway, and stopped. Then a man stepped from the trap, opened the gate, and came up to the mill. There he rang the bell at the door of the dispensary below.

St. John crouched down and waited, listening intently. He had chosen the side opposite the door for his ascent, and had no fear of his scaling ladder being discovered.

The door below opened, and a voice said—

"I saw a light in your workshop and stopped——"

"As I hoped you might if you came down by that train. You have heard——"

"Yes; I read the news in an afternoon paper just in time to catch the 5.30 from Liverpool Street."

"Come in."

"Thanks; no. I have a trap outside, and I'm on my way to the Hall. My cousin is there?"

"Yes; but probably now asleep with the rest of the household."

"I must go and see."

"No; you will spend the night with me. I can give you a shakedown. Dismiss your trap; you are not expected at the Hall, and can do no good there at this hour. Moreover, I have something of the utmost consequence to tell you before you go there. That is why you found my harbour light burning."

Valentine, without further argument, went down to the gate, paid the flyman, and returned to Dr. Sturgess. They entered; the door was shut, and then St. John heard the voices indistinctly speaking in the workshop alongside.

St. John crept back to the gasometer and peered into the workshop. Valentine was seated, Dr. Sturgess was setting cigars and whisky on the table. Now and then a word or two was audible, but he could not make out their disjointed sense. What was he to do? The visitor was clearly Lord Rawton from his reference to his cousin at the Hall. They might sit yarning there all through the night; at any rate, Rawton was to spend the night in the mill. That put another aspect on his meditated crime.

What matter was it that Sturgess wished to communicate, and so earnestly that on the chance of intercepting Lord Rawton's passage to the Hall he had worked beyond his usual hour? On the other side of the mill above the dispensary floor was another door opening from the workshop into the gallery. St. John crept round, passing on hands and knees beneath the windows, and reaching this door laid his ear close

to it. Now every word spoken within was audible distinctly.

"They gave me every assistance they could," Valentine was saying. "They showed me figures which demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that no such sum as a million francs could have been lost at the tables during the time in which my uncle's fortune had disappeared. The money was drawn from the Credit Lyonnaise only six days before my uncle left Monaco."

"And you yourself are convinced he did not lose this million of francs there?"

"Quite."

"In what form was the money taken from the bank by your uncle?"

"Chiefly in notes."

"Cannot the notes be traced?"

"The numbers of some are known. The police expect to trace them ultimately; but it will take time."

"You yourself have no idea what became of them—this huge sum, nearly fifty thousand pounds—after they were paid to your uncle?"

"None whatever. Of course, one's first idea is that they were stolen; the mere bulk of such a quantity of notes precludes the idea that they were lost accidentally."

"Two persons had charge of those notes—your uncle and Lady Vivienne. Does that give you any

clue as to who the thief was that robbed your uncle?"

"None whatever."

"Do you think you can keep a level head if I tell you who I think did rob your uncle?"

"I will try to."

"Very well, then. I believe Lady Vivienne robbed your uncle, and can lay her hand on those notes whenever it suits her."

"That is a very terrible charge to make, Dr. Sturgess."

"It is. And for that reason it is not made without premeditation. I say again, that to the best of my belief the £50,000 lost by your uncle is in the hands of Lady Vivienne Biron."

"If that is a fact, my cousin is indirectly the cause of her father's suicide."

"*If* he committed suicide."

"If! Have you any doubt about that point?"

"A very grave doubt indeed. Now listen to me. That person we have, for the sake of convenience, called Lady Vivienne Biron is not your cousin, nor the daughter of the late Lord Rawton. She is the daughter of a convicted murderer named Dudley St. John—the greatest villain who ever escaped hanging, and I fear that inherited villainy has not been eradicated—no, not even modified by conditions that should have made her an honest young woman. Like father, like child."

"Dudley St. John!" in a reflective tone.

"Have you heard the name before?" sharply asked the voice of Dr. Sturgess.

"I have—from the person you say is his daughter."

"She met him at Monaco when he went there to blackmail Mrs. Magister?"

"She did."

"That was prior to your uncle's loss of his fortune—before the million francs was drawn from the Credit Lyonnaise?"

"Yes, some days."

"From that moment she recognized her identity, and saw that she could not inherit the fortune willed by Lord Rawton to his daughter. Had I known this, she could never have deceived me, and a great crime—greater than robbery—might have been averted."

* * * * *

With irrepressible anxiety, Vivienne waited outside the Hall beneath the window by which St. John must re-enter the house. In a close-fitting toque and New-market coat she paced up and down in fearful suspense, treading noiselessly as a cat, with her ear strained to catch the sound of his approach. At length, between twelve and one, he returned. He clutched her arm savagely, and thrusting his face close to hers, glared at her in silence under the faint light of the stars, unable to speak for some moments with suppressed fury.

Then he spat out foul words and curses in her teeth.

"Do you want to be heard? Come further from the

house if you can't keep your temper. Now what is it?" she asked, when she had led him to a safe distance from the Hall.

"This, you ——! You've tried to do me and failed. You're *my* daughter!"

"Have you only just discovered that? I knew it the moment you told me your story at Monte Carlo."

"You made me believe I had stabbed you in the hip."

"You were so ready to believe anything. You stabbed Rawton's daughter through the arm!"

"Well, there's an end to my belief. You won't inherit a farthing of Rawton's fortune."

"I've got it. I took it to save trouble—and the death duties. Here it is." She put her hand in her dress and snapped something, and brought out a paper. "You shall have your share at once—if you have earned it. Have you a vesta?"

"I've something better than that."

He brought from his pocket an ounce bottle and drew the cork. It gave out a phosphorescent light sufficient to show the writing on the paper she held before it. It was a cheque for 1,200,000 francs, issued by the Nice branch of the London, New York, and Paris International Banking Co., and payable to Mlle. Mary St. John or order ("and countersign").

He grasped her wrist and clutched at the paper when he had read it.

"Don't tear it, and please drop my hand. The

cheque is useless to you without my order and the countersign, known only to myself and the bankers. You shall be paid your 600,000 francs to the last farthing, and I will show you how you may secure the payment, when I am equally sure that you have done your work."

He dropped her hand in silence, and thrust back the bottle into his pocket.

"Well?" she asked, at the same time replacing the paper and securing it with a snap.

"I couldn't get the chance," he muttered. "And some one dropped in and they are yarning there now."

"Who dropped in?"

"Valentine Biron—Lord Rawton."

"And you heard the doctor tell him who I am—and all that."

"Yes."

"Then now you have two to put out of the way instead of one. Do you see that?"

"I see that you are likely to hang if I don't."

"Well, that would not trouble you greatly were it not for the certainty that you will hang at the same time." Neither spoke for a full minute, then she said, "Well, what are you going to do—bolt?"

"Bolt! And leave you here to make out a case against me. Save your own neck by breaking mine. I know you now."

"Wise father."

"Oh, curse your cleverness! What are you going to do?"

"If you bolt I shall go to bed and take my chance. If I pull through—and it's just possible I may—I shall live abroad on my 1,200,000 francs. *You* won't want any."

"And your chance is small. I warn you. I've heard enough to-night to show that Sturgess will show you no mercy."

"That's why I'm waiting here."

"Damn your riddles! I'm not going to guess at your meaning. If you want to be understood, speak plainly."

"Well, are you going to bolt and be caught to-morrow on the charge of having poisoned Lord Rowton, or are you strong enough to prevent the charge being made against you?"

"I tell you there are two of 'em up there now."

"Is it more difficult to put two out of the way than one?"

"Not a bit, if——" he paused to listen.

The clock over the stables was chiming the hour; presently it struck two.

"It won't be light before five. You have three hours," she suggested.

"And how about the money?"

"You shall have absolute security."

"How?"

"I am going with you to the mill to see you do

this thing—to help if you need my help. When the thing is done we will come back here and face the inquiry into Rowton's death in perfect safety. No one in the world save those two men in the mill knows either our relation or our history. They being out of the way a verdict of suicide must be returned by the coroner. When that is over we will go together to the International Bank and claim payment of the cheque. You shall not leave me for a moment."

"Trust me for that."

"At the bank the payment shall be made in two separate portions—600,000 francs for you, 600,000 francs for me—and there the matter ends and we separate for ever."

"And supposing at the last moment you claim the whole amount for yourself?"

"In that case you say to the clerk, 'I accuse that person of being in possession of 1,200,000 francs stolen from the late Lord Rawton,' and neither of us will get a penny. Now are you satisfied?"

"Yes;" and then after a moment's reflection, "By God, I'll do it!"

"Then let us start at once. It's time the thing was done."

SCENE IV

A DAUGHTER'S TREACHERY

The mill was in darkness when they reached it. Not a light glimmered from any window in the four stories of the huge building—no light anywhere save in the still stars overhead. Unusually still, not a breath of wind stirred the leaves to break the profound silence.

At the base of the mill St. John stood motionless, straining every sense to catch the smallest indication of life. Vivienne, beside him, was as keenly observant. Then two words passed in a whisper between them.

"All right?"

"Yes."

For the second time that night St. John extended his scaling apparatus, gripped the handrail above, and silently climbed to the gallery encircling the first story. He crept round now to the door, lifted the latch, and pushed gently but firmly, ready to retreat at any instant. The door opened, and he entered with the silent continuity of a snake unfolding its coil. Grey patches in the darkness marked the windows; all else was obscure.

The phosphor-bottle enabled him to cross the workshop and steer clear of obstacles in his way. Opposite the door and against the wall a flight of wooden steps led to the floor above; at the foot was a hatchway opening upon the steps that descended to the dispensary below. It was closed by a trap-door opening upwards and sideways against the wall; an iron ring at the edge served as a handle for raising it. He lifted it and secured the trap to the wall by the drop catch set in the brickwork. He knew all about this, having gone carefully over the ground the night before. Access to the lower floor being now open he crept up the steps to open a way to the floor above. This was again closed by a trap-door similar to the one beneath. It yielded easily to the upward pressure of his hand, and stood open by its own inclination against the wall.

He would have liked to open the hatch in the third-floor, but he dared not venture further, not having previously explored beyond the workshop, and doubtful whether Dr. Sturgess might not have given his visitor his "shake down" on that story.

He now crept down to the workshop, and thence descended by the steps into the dispensary. Here nothing was unfamiliar to him, so exhaustively had he examined it the night before.

The door was locked; but he turned the key quietly and set it half open. Outside Vivienne stood,

tall and erect in the dim light of the stars, her hands in the pockets of her Newmarket, awaiting the development of events not without some prevision of what was to happen.

How did he intend to kill the two men? He had no weapon, and she doubted if her father had the courage to make a direct attack upon them, even in their beds.

The slightly conical form of the mill was suggestive of a kiln, and a kiln of fire. If a sufficient quantity of inflammable matter were properly ignited on the lower floors, escape from the upper would be impossible. Regarding the mill as a kiln, she pictured the flames roaring up the huge funnel as in a blast furnace. Descent by the inside would be utterly impossible; but how about the outside? Running her eye up the lofty structure, the height of the upper gallery looked prodigious—much greater in the faint light than it actually was. The only egress from the upper floor was the gallery, and to leap thence to the ground would be immediate death, even to the athlete. Certainly the fate of Dr. Sturgess was sealed should the mill be fired.

"All right?" he questioned in a whisper.

And as before she answered "Yes."

She lost sight of him for a few minutes. A window near the open door slowly opened, then she saw the phosphor-bottle moving along a shelf of glass vessels at the back of the dispensary. St. John took down a

bottle, put it to his nose, and then poured some liquid from it upon his handkerchief. He replaced the bottle and came out with the dripping handkerchief in his hand. Vivienne detected the pungent odour of spirit of wine as he passed her. He carefully placed the handkerchief on the outer sill of the window he had opened and beside it a box of matches.

Now she perceived beyond doubt that he intended to fire the mill, and when he re-entered the dispensary she followed him to the door, curious to see what combustibles he should employ, and very anxious he should not make a fool of himself at this time when so much depended on his success.

He saw her standing there, and her interest in his proceedings flattered his vanity. She might be vastly clever in her own way, but he would presently show her that in his own line he was a pastmaster.

On the dispensing counter stood an ordinary stoneware filter with a tap in the base. It contained about half a gallon of water. He carried it to the stairs leading up to the workshop, and placed it on the fourth step from the bottom. Returning to the counter he set down his phosphor-lamp and groped underneath the counter, and presently rolled out a round tin keg with an airtight cover, secured by a bolt and thrust screw.

Of all the practical applications of scientific discovery which had been made during the twenty-one years of St. John's incarceration, none on his coming

out had struck him with such admiration as acetylene gas. It had appealed at once to his criminal imagination as a most useful agent for profitable arson. In exploring the dispensary he had discovered a keg of the substance from which the stuff was made, carbide of calcium, and had at once seen how it might be employed for his villainous purpose. Already he had made some crude experiments with the product, sufficient to prove its enormous capabilities. A spoonful of carbide dropped into half a glass of water had produced an unextinguishable flame that shot up to the ceiling. From the experiment, it was easy to conclude what effect would be produced by turning the tap of a vessel containing half a gallon of water upon an open keg containing at least twenty pounds of the stuff and then throwing a light into the gas evolved. This was his purpose now. He was about to repeat his former experiment upon a gigantic scale.

He rolled the keg up to the steps and placed it carefully beneath the filter in such a position that, the cover removed and the tap turned on, the water would stream continually into the carbide. When this simple apparatus was adjusted to his satisfaction he straightened himself and looked round about him to see that no necessary precaution had been overlooked. There was the open window with the saturated handkerchief lying in it beside the matches, there the open door with Vivienne standing in the way. He went up to her, exulting even at this moment in her mystification. It was not to be

supposed that a woman should understand anything about chemistry and that sort of thing.

"You had better get out of the way," he said whispering, "there's going to be a big flare up and maybe a bit of an explosion."

"Not before you get out of the place," she replied.

"Not likely; only look out, that's all."

She drew close to the door that he might have room to pass when the time for escape came.

He returned to the steps, and going on his knees, held the phosphor-bottle in one hand while with the other he began to unscrew the bolt that held the cover.

Vivienne knew fully as much about acetylene gas as he did, having used it constantly on the Continent in the lamps of her "quad."

And while he was doing this Vivienne's hand stole round the door and gently removed the key from the inside of the lock; as stealthily she slipped it into the keyhole on the other side. By the time the operation was completed St. John had the thrust screw off and the cover of the keg loosened. Once more he glanced round. The door stood open, Vivienne's figure flattened against it. Everything was in order. He whipped off the cover and turned the tap.

As he rose to his feet the poisonous gas overpowered him. He seemed to be whirling in space. He reeled forward and fell, got up and staggered wildly towards the door like a drunken man. This came of knowing too much and not enough. He

was ignorant of the toxic effect of acetylene. The door was closed when he reached it, and as he plunged against it he heard the key turn in the lock, and at once recognized his position and the diabolical treachery of his daughter.

The awful peril in which he stood served in part to overcome the effects of the gas upon his senses and sober him. Holding his breath he staggered back to the steps and threw down the filter. Too late; a quart of water had run into the keg. The gas was developing in fatal quantity.

Could he hold his breath long enough to get to the open window? Could he find it, reeling like a man in the last stage of intoxication. It seemed safer to drag heavily up the steps and gain the open door of the workshop and the open air of the gallery. Scarcely a dozen seconds had elapsed since the gas had first overcome him. There was no time for reflection, no power of clear perception in his condition, otherwise he might, after finding the door closed, have made immediately for the open window. His first thought had been to stop the gas. It was the useless instinctive action of one on the metals throwing out his hands to resist the onrush of a locomotive.

With the last desperate struggle for life he dragged himself up the steps. The unmistakable sound of a match being struck reached his ear to give him fresh impetus, then a great flash of white light surrounded him with the deafening crash of breaking glass and

the roar of flame as it shot up the open hatchway. He was on the floor of the workshop, now writhing and rolling onward along the path of the flame towards the open door, the huge tongue licking round him and whipping him in its course. The last convulsive effort shot him over the edge of the gallery, and he fell to the ground.

There he was found by old Parke, brought from his bed by the sound of the explosion, and rushing to the mill door in some mad hope of saving his master —lying in a heap, motionless and black, smoke rising from him with the rank stench of burning flesh, the garments smouldering upon his body and limbs in red patches.

* * * * *

Dr. Sturgess and Valentine tumbled from their beds at the shock and crash of the explosion.

"Out into the open air, quick!" cried the doctor, scenting the acetylene, and he flung open the door opening on to the upper gallery.

Great globes of fire belched from the workshop below, and shot upwards; the heat and smoke were overpowering.

"Round to the wind'ard, lad. We shall be safe there," he added, leading the way round the gallery.

There, with the wind blowing upon them, they could breathe freely, the flame and smoke that issued from the broken windows in the dispensary and workshop being carried away to leeward.

"Gas?" questioned Valentine.

"That's clear by the stink of it," returned the doctor; "but it puzzles me for all that."

"I fear it is my fault, doctor. I should have been more careful about cigar stumps, matches, and that sort of thing in a workshop with shavings about."

"You couldn't have been more careless than I. Something left smouldering under the bench," he continued, as if in answer to his own speculations. "A melted tube—escape of gas, and so on. Possible—but not very probable. Let's have a look."

They went round the gallery as far as the heat and smoke permitted and looked down.

There was but little noise now beyond the crackling of burning wood in the two lower chambers. The flame still poured out of windows and the open door, but more steadily and with a muffled roar. After contemplating the work of destruction for a few minutes the doctor returned to the cooler side of the building in sombre silence.

"I suppose we may think about saying our prayers?" Valentine suggested calmly.

"It will do you no harm, nor me either," replied Dr. Sturgess, leaning placidly on the handrail.

"How long do you think we have to live?"

"Well, I give myself about a dozen years, and you about fifty."

"What, with a fire like that roaring below? It has got down to the basement already."

"Yes, and wouldn't—couldn't—if the hatch were down as we left it."

"The fire may have originated there."

"Probably it did. But in that case the explosion would not have thrown open the workshop door had the hatch been shut. What's the matter, Parke?" he shouted, catching sight of the old man below.

"Oh, you're there, sir! Thank God!" cried Parke. "There's a man round the front there, sir, all burnt up, and I thought——"

"Ah, I thought so—some meddling, muddling fool who ought to be under the charge of a maternal Government and be safely sleeping in a prison cell," he muttered *sotto voce*. "If there's any sign of life in him," he cried, "cut the clothes off his body and drag him out of the smoke. And then clap the mare in the gig and fetch Dr. Stevens from Cromeby. I shan't be able to get out of this for a couple of hours or more."

"You're all right, sir?"

"Right as rain."

"Is it possible we may escape, and in a couple of hours?" Valentine asked.

"Quite. The workshop and all in the dispensary will have burned themselves out in an hour, and the brickwork will stand."

"But the floor above the workshop?"

"That's safe. The hatch there is down—you can see no glimmer of light in the windows of that floor"—

he nodded downwards over the rail on which he leant. "There's always risk in a workshop where you do a bit of wood-working," he continued with perfect calm. "It ought to be up on this floor. It was once. But I moved below to be nearer the dispensary if any one dropped in for one thing, and because I like to sleep as near heaven as I can get. But I'm not fool enough to neglect precautions for my safety in case of accident. So I turned that third-floor into a bath-room, had the floor fireproofed, and put in that light iron staircase in place of the old wooden steps. There's absolutely nothing more inflammable, and so the bath-room stands as a fireproof compartment between my bed and any possible mischief below. The glare is going down; we will have another peep." They walked again to the lee. The flame below was less in volume, redder, and the smoke less offensive. "The carbide has dried up. No more gas," said the doctor. "I miscalculated, the fire will be out in half an hour."

SCENE V

VIVIENNE'S MOURNING

As soon as the servants were about Vivienne rang her bell and ordered a cup of black coffee. Her maid brought it. This was a very different person to Thérèse. Tall and angular, with compressed lips and severe aspect; perfectly correct and quite English. Were the heavens falling she would not have opened those lips before her mistress unaddressed.

"There was a peculiar glow in the sky early this morning," said Vivienne, taking the coffee. "I hope nothing has happened in any of the farm buildings?"

"No, madame; Rawton Mill was on fire."

"No one was injured severely?"

"They say a man was burnt to death, madame."

"Oh, not Dr. Sturgess?" with intense anxiety.

"No, madame. He is quite safe. No one knows who the party is, he is so burnt up."

That was satisfactory to a certain degree, though it would certainly have been better had all three been burnt up. She knew now what to expect, and

prepared herself for Valentine's coming, which would surely be at an early hour.

In fact, Valentine walked over to the Hall soon after eight. The correct maid was descending the great staircase as he entered, and stood before him with some embarrassment, and a considerable relaxation of severity. For even the most stiffly starched of maids may dream dreams, and their future master had been much discussed in the servants' hall, where he was enormously admired, not only because he was handsome, and generous, and kindly, but also by reason of certain whispered legends bequeathed by their lady's volatile French maid.

"Is your mistress down yet?"

"No, my lord. Shall I say you are here?"

"Don't disturb her; it is not necessary," he said, and went slowly upstairs.

It was the first time he had been addressed by his new title. It did not tickle his vanity in the slightest degree; it impressed him only with the sense of more responsibility and the desire to live up to a noble standard.

The door of his uncle's room was partly open, and he passed in with that silent tread that seems instinctive in the presence of the dead; he advanced a couple of paces and then stopped abruptly. In the dim light that came through the shrouded windows he perceived Vivienne kneeling by the dead man's bed. There was no sobbing, no violent demonstration of grief. The part

was not overacted now. Vivienne, like other actresses, studied to adapt her performance to the intelligence of her audience, and the pathos of this unhappy woman kneeling in still devotion by her dead benefactor was nicely calculated to go home to Valentine's heart. He withdrew as silently as he had entered. The dead who suffer no more were no more sacred in his esteem than those who live to mourn.

He had listened patiently to Dr. Sturgess, had heard all he had to say against this woman, and, reserving his judgment, had come now to hear the other side. The doctor could produce no positive evidence of her duplicity, nothing but suppositions accepted for facts, possibly because they fitted in with his theory. And the very basis of that theory was prejudice—the conclusion, drawn from his belief in the transmission of qualities and defects, that Vivienne was criminal because her father was a murderer. Valentine wished the doctor could have seen the poor girl kneeling there by the bed. How would he have explained that? There could be no trickery in it, no attempt to deceive him, at any rate, since his presence in Rawton was unknown to any one save Dr. Sturgess, and his visit at this early hour the least likely of improbable accidents.

With these reflections passing through his mind he stood by a window in the corridor looking over the park, until at the sound of a footfall he turned and

found Vivienne coming slowly towards him. She stopped, seeing him, with a start and a look of dazed incredulity—just long enough for him to see her at her worst. And, indeed, to Valentine, who had last seen her face beautiful with all the advantages art can give to nature, she looked an absolute wreck, now that art had been employed solely to disfigure. Red lids, dark lines beneath the eyes, an ashen complexion and colourless lips; all harmonized with the expression of wasting despair in her face. In her plain close-fitting unrelieved black dress her figure, like her face, seemed to have withered and shrunk under mental and physical suffering. It was hard to realize that this plain, broken-spirited girl was the same Vivienne who had inspired him even with momentary passion. Pity, deep sorrow, the sincerest sympathy now only filled his heart.

"Vivienne!" he said, stretching forth his hand.

She did not take it, but drew her own back; for a moment or two she gazed into his face in mute despair; then covering her face with her hands, she sobbed—

"You do not know—you do not know!"

She turned from him choking with grief, and passed with bowed head into her boudoir. He followed her without hesitation now into the room where her charms had once before failed to lure him, and the significance was not lost upon her. Her spell was broken; at the same time she consoled herself for the fact by the

tacit compliment paid to her admirable acting and "make up."

She seated herself in a graceful attitude, leaning back in her chair, dropping her chin upon her breast, and suffering her poor, trembling hands to fall folded upon her knee—a study for Melpomene.

On the table beside her was a work-basket (borrowed from the housekeeper) and a black skirt unpicked, to indicate that in her now impoverished condition she was setting herself to turn her own dresses (she had never in her life used a needle even for amusement). By the skirt lay a copy of "The Imitation," by Thomas à Kempis, the place marked by a strip of black material. (A poetical imagination might have figured her reading a passage from time to time and reflecting upon it as she toiled on with her needle.) And, partly concealed by the work-basket, a pair of man's gloves lay neatly folded and pressed.

When she had allowed him sufficient time to observe the *mise en scène*, she raised her head, and with eyelids fluttering to banish the blinding tears, said slowly—

"You know he is no more?"

"I read the dreadful news in the *Globe* yesterday afternoon."

"It has travelled so quickly! Oh, Valentine, the dearest friend I ever had! The most loving, simple-hearted, devoted darling—more than a father to me—only too generous, too indulgent, too blind to my

faults, for I have been wicked—you know how wicked. Oh, if I might live my life again, undo my faults, begin now with a chastened heart and pure thoughts! If I could redeem the past, and bring him back to see how little I value that for which he gave his life! My poor, poor darling!"

She brushed away the invisible tear, and her hand falling as if by accident upon the gloves, she took them up and pressed them to her cheek.

"See, these are his gloves," she said; "the one memento I shall take away from here. Look how worn they are, the finger-ends are open with long use, and I never noticed them till now. These he wore, grudging himself the few shillings they would cost. And yet he would not let me wear my own a second time. Is it not piteous? And I thought so little of it while he lived—being so wilful, so careless in my happiness. God forgive me as he has punished me!"

Could such words come from one who had not felt? Valentine asked himself.

"I am glad you have come so soon, Valentine," she continued, laying aside the gloves reverently, and turning to him with summoned fortitude. "I want you to hear the truth first from my lips. I am not your cousin; even the last tie is broken."

"There is no stronger tie than sympathy. My feelings, my affection for you is no less because you are not my cousin."

"You know it, then?"

"I heard it from Dr. Sturgess last night."

"And still you feel kindly towards me—oh, Valentine!——" She stretched out her hand involuntarily, it seemed, and with a look of ineffable gratitude in her face, her eyes suffused with tenderness, and then, as if in horror of herself, her expression changed to shame and dread as she snatched back her hand, exclaiming, "You do not know all!"

Was she about to confess the crime openly imputed to her by the stubborn doctor? Valentine waited in suspense.

She sank her head again, her bosom heaving with suppressed emotion. When she spoke it was in measured tones and calm; the gushing fit was past.

"He told you of the deception put upon your uncle. Heaven knows, I have no right to question whether he did well or ill. If he did ill, I forgive him for the noble motive that guided him. He may say, and truly enough, that in your uncle he gave me the kindest guardian in the world; but he was a man, and could not see the temptations that beset me. His unbounded love for me blinded him to those faults in my nature which a sterner guardian might have corrected. I have never known the influence of a pure woman. Had I been guided by such a woman as Mrs. Magister I might have been now as pure and innocent a girl as Midge—your real cousin. Had Dr. Sturgess suffered justice to be done, my father would have been dead twenty-one years ago; but now he lives, a criminal still,

to drag me down to his condition, a partner in his shame."

This reflection had occurred to Valentine. It had occurred, moreover, to Dr. Sturgess himself, and may have accounted for his bitterness, for the fault in others which is due to ours is most resented; and also for his pertinacious determination that justice should not again be perverted.

"I told you how I met St. John, my father," (with hesitation), "at Monte Carlo. At that time he was as ignorant as I that we were father and daughter. But by some means he discovered the truth and lost no time in claiming from me the advantages he hoped to wring from Mrs. Magister. One night, when I came up from dinner, I found him seated in that chair—pointing with dramatic horror at a chair in the darker end of the room. I screamed for help, although half paralyzed with fear, and seeing his danger, he went to the open window, got out, and descended by the same felon's apparatus employed to get into the room. Ten minutes after my maid brought up a card on which was printed 'Mr. Robinson,' and below the name of my father's solicitors in Lincoln's Inn. I thought at once this must be the accountant you wished to employ, and hurried down to the library, only to find there my father again. I was about to ring the bell and have him removed, when he seized my hand and said, 'Tell any one who I am, and all shall know who you are—my daughter!' He told me the story briefly, and to prove

the truth said, 'Have you seen a scar in the arm of the girl you call Midge Magister—a scar on the upper and under side of the biceps? That scar is where I stabbed Lord Rawton's daughter.' He offered to leave me at once if I would pay him. I had nothing in the world. My jewels were sent to London to raise money for paying my darling's debt. Every shilling I possessed had been scraped together to pay the servants. I was absolutely penniless. Then he said this, 'I must live. I have neither money, food, nor a bed to lie on. Keep me in the house how you like, as the lawyer's representative I pretend to be, till you can get money to pay my passage to America, or I must go to Lord Rawton, tell him the truth, and as your father beg him to keep me out of gaol.' What could I do but submit? I did submit, and for a week he has been living in this house."

"Do you know where he is now at the present moment?" Valentine asked gravely.

"In the rooms set apart for him in the west wing," she replied, without hesitation.

"I have reason to think he is not. Do you mind taking me to his rooms?" he asked, rising.

She was silent for a minute, then rising, she said with resignation—

"My shame cannot be greater. Come!"

They followed the corridor into the west wing and entered the room St. John had used as a study and living-room. His breakfast untouched stood on the

table. Vivienne crossed the room to the door opening into his sleeping-chamber, and knocked twice. Then she opened the door and looked in.

"He is not there!" she exclaimed in surprise. "His bed has not been slept on. Has he left me at last? No, that is not likely. Here is his bag."

"May I ask you to open it?"

She opened it at once. A piece of green baize contained a beautiful little American centre-bit, a polished steel jemmy, and other neat housebreaking tools. From a pocket in the side of the bag she took out something wrapped in tissue paper. She opened it, and, laying it on the table, turned to Valentine with the deepest shame and humiliation in her face.

Valentine, glancing at the object in the paper, recognized his uncle's signet-ring.

"Taken from the dead," she said, scarcely above her breath.

"Don't give way, Vivienne," said Valentine, laying his hand on her shoulder; "I think your ordeal is nearly over. Tell me if you notice anything belonging to St. John that is missing."

She looked around her quickly.

"It is gone!" she whispered; "the instrument he used to climb up to my window."

"What was it like?"

"Like a stick, but it drew out as a fishing-rod does, and a thing screwed into the top with a long cord attached to it."

"Then it was your father that has met with a fearful accident. He is scarcely recognizable, yet Dr. Sturgess fancied he saw some resemblance. The machine you describe identifies him; he is dying, if not already dead."

"Thank God!" she murmured, bowing her head.

SCENE VI

THE DOCTOR'S DISCOVERY

Dr. Stevens was leaving Dr. Sturgess when Valentine returned to Rawton Mill. The young Cromeby doctor smiling and dapper, seated in his smart dog-cart, the Rawton doctor rough as a bear, and not less surly, standing in his shirt-sleeves with his hands in his trouser pockets.

"Oh, by-the-by, you'll want a good nurse," said Dr. Stevens, pulling in his mare. "I know a reliable one; shall I send her over?"

"No; I'll nurse him myself."

"Then there's the greater chance of his pulling through. Good morning."

"You think the man may recover?" asked Valentine.

Sturgess jerked his head contemptuously.

"We may keep him alive for a week; but he'll never recover. The chief trouble is the throat. The rest of his charred anatomy may take its chance. If his throat can't be made to swallow and speak he must die in a day or two of inanition. And there's so much

pain wasted. If I could only get a word or two out of him."

"You think you could get a confession?" Valentine suggested.

Dr. Sturgess replied by whistling a bar of a popular air, and, suddenly breaking off, said—

"Let's get into the garden where we can smell something sweeter than phœnic acid and smouldering rubbish."

He led the way into the old-fashioned garden, with its rows of peas and beans and spinach, and its borders of perennials; and plumping himself into a garden-seat under the shade of a lilac, pulled out a pipe and a tobacco-pouch from his capacious pockets. Valentine seated himself, and filled up also.

"Now let's have it out, my boy," said the old man, pulling at his pipe and folding his arms on his chest. "What do you want?"

"I want to know what attitude you intend to take at the inquest to-morrow," Valentine answered, coming to the point at once.

"Because——?" questioned the doctor.

"Because if it is to be hostile to Miss St. John I must lose no time in procuring a lawyer to watch the case on her behalf."

"A lawyer!"—with a sniff and a jerk of the head —"she wants no one to take up the cudgels for her."

"No; but I do."

"You have seen Miss St. John this morning?"

"Yes."

"And she convinced you that she was innocent and very much to be pitied?"

"Yes."

"She convinced me in the same way the last time I saw her. That conviction might have lasted but that I picked up a little thing which completely undeceived me. May I ask if you have picked up anything to support the opposite conclusion?"

"I have learned something which I should be very glad to let you know. But in justice to her I must conceal it until I am sure that it cannot be used to her disadvantage."

"You may be certain of this: to a straight question I shall give a straight answer."

"Ye-es."

"By the long drawn out 'Ye-es,' you show how an affirmative answer may be made to carry a negative impression."

"You are not the man, doctor, to do anything obliquely. It simply occurred to me that if the straight question put to you is, 'What do you know of Miss St. John?' your straight answer would be, 'I know that she is the daughter of a murderer.'"

"That raises the whole question at once, and the aspect will not be improved if it comes out in evidence that her father in all probability is the man who tried to burn us in our beds last night."

"You see——" Valentine extended his hands comprehensively.

"Yes; and I see an adjourned inquest ending in the committal of Miss St. John to take her trial for murder at the next assizes."

"That is what I fear."

"And so you wish me to connive at the escape of a criminal by shutting my mouth—to repeat to-morrow the act of folly I committed twenty-one years ago, when I suffered that villain St. John to escape hanging. You see the result in his case; well, the daughter is only twenty-one, and has half a century before her in which she may perpetrate incalculable injury to others. It's false sentiment of pity that would loose a tiger of that sort upon society."

"The cases are not alike, doctor. You had absolute proof that St. John was criminal; you have none that his daughter is 'a tiger'; every particle of evidence you can bring against her is presumptive."

"Is it? Look at that, Lord Rawton."

He fished a long, flat steel key from his pocket, and put it in Valentine's hand.

"Well?" said he, after examining it.

"The strongest proof that your uncle poisoned himself lies in the fact that the door of his room was locked, and had to be forced open before his body was found. The door was locked, and with that key. I picked it up about fourteen inches from the threshold on the inner side of the door. That seems consistent

enough with his having locked the door before taking the poison, and the key being knocked out of the lock by the bursting in of the door."

"Yes, precisely."

"But now comes the proof that he did not lock the door, and could not have locked it. That is the key of a Bramah lock—these locks are supposed to be unpickable, and are used chiefly for safes and strong-rooms, they are also used as in this case where rooms are locked up for a great length of time, and left by the owners to the care of a gardener or a charwoman. But the chief peculiarity of the lock is this—it can only be locked on the outside. Now, sir, can you doubt that your uncle was murdered, and the murderer locking the door, in ignorance of this fact, thrust the key under the door into the room to establish the idea of suicide?"

"This, then, is the little thing which completely undeceived you?" said Valentine.

"It is."

"And this, you think, is sufficient to convict that poor girl of murder?"

"I do," said the doctor, emphatically, stretching forth his legs, and pulling harder at his pipe.

"Then now I'll show you what I've picked up, doctor. Look at that." He removed a ring from his finger and put it on the doctor's hand. "It is my uncle's signet. He wore it habitually up to the time of his death. The morning after it was gone from his

finger; you may have remarked the fact when his body was being laid out." The doctor nodded. "I myself found it this morning in a bag—belonging to a person who was staying in the Hall on the night of his death. One cannot reasonably suppose that the person murdered my uncle for the sake of that ring; but it is quite presumable that, being a dishonest person, as the possession of the ring proves, he might, in marauding the house before the servants were down, have entered my uncle's room, found him dead, removed the ring, and afterwards locked the door and pushed the key under, as you suggest, with a view to concealing the theft."

Dr. Sturgess laid his pipe down in silence, rose to his feet, took a few paces along the walk, and then returning to Valentine, said in grave humility—

"Lord Rawton, I am glad to find myself in error, and I freely acknowledge that your proof is as strong as mine, and overthrows my theory completely. You have prevented me from inflicting unnecessary pain, and making a fool of myself publicly into the bargain."

"The case stands pretty well as it stood," said Valentine with good nature; "the evidence for and against the girl is entirely presumptive; but I hold that the balance is happily in her favour."

"It is; no jury could convict on such a tissue of mere probabilities. In all likelihood the trial would have created more sympathy for her than she merits. I warrant her portrait would be all over London, and

she would receive half a dozen offers of marriage before the verdict was pronounced. You will say that I am betraying a lingering animus against Miss St. John. I don't deny it. Nevertheless, I admit I have done her an injustice, and I shall be glad if you will show how I can make reparation."

"That can only be done by feeling differently towards her; and I can't see how you can alter your feeling save by weighing well all that reason may suggest in her favour, and tempering justice with mercy."

* * * * *

At the inquest, after the jury had viewed the body, the first witness called to identify the dead Rawton was Vivienne.

"Your name, I believe," said the clerk, "is Vivienne Biron?"

"No," she replied calmly; "my name is Mary St. John."

The clerk looked perplexed. The coroner, suspecting illegitimacy, said blandly—

"Nevertheless you are the daughter of the late Lord Rawton."

"No, I am not in any way related to him. I was simply his adopted daughter, as Dr. Sturgess may explain," she said, looking fearlessly across at the doctor.

"That is immaterial to the inquiry. It is sufficient that you were known as Lord Rawton's daughter under the name of Vivienne Biron."

The inquiry then proceeded, with no reference to the point which had seemed of such vital importance to Valentine. Vivienne's straightforward answers disarmed suspicion. Undoubtedly she had no need of a solicitor.

The evidence of Dr. Sturgess was then taken as to the cause of death. The deceased had undoubtedly died from poisoning by anhydrous hydrocyanic acid—known in a diluted form as prussic acid. He spoke briefly and to the point; not a word too much or too little.

Mr. Simmonds was next called. He deposed to the discussion that had taken place in the afternoon between himself and Lord Rawton with regard to the embarrassed state of affairs on the estate, and to the alarming effect upon Rawton's mind, of his grave suspicion that Rawton meditated suicide, and his consequent visit to the Hall and Dr. Sturgess. He felt it necessary to warn Lady Vivienne of impending calamity. Vivienne and Dr. Sturgess corroborated this statement; and at the request of the coroner Vivienne described her last interview with the deceased. She was in the habit of going into his room the last thing before going to bed, to bid him good night; on this occasion she was more than usually observant in consequence of what Mr. Simmonds had told her, and the distress which evidently agitated his mind. He ate scarcely anything, and went to his room immediately after dinner on the plea of fatigue. With the dreadful fear of fatal

intention she looked carefully for any sign of premeditated suicide. In a cabinet was a case containing a pair of duelling pistols; she saw that this was undisturbed. There was nothing to justify apprehension. The travelling dressing-case which he kept locked in a closet was certainly not to be seen then.

"Did you know that poison was contained in that case?" the coroner asked.

"No; but I knew there were razors. The slip of paper with the figures upon it was certainly not on the table at that time. He seemed quite calm then."

"Was there nothing in his manner to excite alarm?"

"Nothing—except——." Here her lips quivered, so that she could not speak. She covered her face with her hand for a minute. When she raised her head a tear was running down her cheek. "Except that he was so sweet with me," she sobbed, and broke down again.

The jury were moist-eyed to a man.

The coroner, to spare her unnecessary pain, brought the proceedings to a close as speedily as possible. He summed up the evidence briefly and clearly, directed the jury to weigh the evidence impartially—at the same time giving them to understand the direction of his own judgment—and to return a verdict in accordance with their unbiased opinion.

The jury put their wise heads together for a few minutes, and then the foreman, returning to his place,

gave it as their unanimous decision that Rawton, under temporary insanity, had committed suicide.

The court broke up, and those who had been called together went their way. Dr. Sturgess was the only one who left the Hall dissatisfied, and his discontent was rather with himself than with the finding of the jury. Why could he not hold Vivienne guiltless when the balance of evidence, as Valentine had pointed out, was distinctly in her favour? Why could he not find a little charity in his heart towards a girl handicapped as she was by the circumstances of her birth, and possibly by laxity of education?

SCENE VII

VIVIENNE'S DEPARTURE

Vivienne, who had borne up so bravely during the inquest, when it was all over had left the library. Valentine overtook her on the stairs, where she had sunk down in an angle, gracefully of course, overwhelmed with grief. She was crying piteously, like a child, her face buried in her hands, her shoulders shaking convulsively with every sob.

"Oh, it is too dreadful, too dreadful!" she whimpered, as Valentine raised her to her feet with such murmured words of consolation as rose from his heart. "I am beginning to realize my terrible position. Oh, let me go! I am not Vivienne—only the child of a murderer—and all know it now!"

He suffered her to go to her room, and went in trouble down to the gloomy dining-room, where lunch was set, and the correct servants waiting as if nothing whatever had happened.

Presently Vivienne's maid came with a written message from Vivienne, begging him to excuse her.

He ordered lunch to be taken to her in her room,

and sat down alone to eat. When the solitary meal was ended, he went upstairs and knocked at the door of Vivienne's boudoir.

She herself opened the door, looking calmer and more composed now.

As he entered he noticed that her travelling-trunk stood near the door, strapped and labelled; her hat and coat lay ready on a chair. Her plate on the lunch-tray was unsoiled; only a glass of water and a broken biscuit on the table by the window indicated that she had sat there, presumably to look for the last time over the park.

"Where are you going?" Valentine asked.

"To London—there is a train from Cromeby about four."

"It will be night when you reach Liverpool Street."

"Thank God! I long for darkness—for the crowded streets, where no one will know me."

"Have you money?"

"Enough to pay my fare."

Valentine took a case of sovereigns from his pocket, and gave it to her.

"Send this back to me when it is convenient," he said, "and here is the key of my diggings in Bloomsbury; it will be better than going to a strange hotel at that hour. This is the address." He wrote it on a scrap of paper. "If you must go."

"Oh, I must! And yet I would have stayed to stand by the grave when *he* is buried. But she will be there—his daughter! I dare not meet her. I should feel that I had been an impostor. But it was not my fault, was it? You will tell her that. And you will say that I pray for her happiness and yours." (Silent tears.) "This is so dear of you," she broke off, choking down her emotion, and taking up the address. "I shall stay there to-night. It will break the fall, as it were. The things that are yours will make me feel that you are near me—that I am not cast away—not——" (More emotion.)

"Your jewels are in London," he said, to draw her from her desolation.

"At Attenborough's. I sent them up to be sold, that I might pay off the debt——"

"That, of course, is out of the question now. They will at least provide for your necessities."

"Ought I to take them, Valentine? They were given me under the belief that I was his daughter."

"He would have given them to you had he known that you were not. No one in the world can deny your right to them."

"There are diamonds which belonged to Lady Rawton," she said. "Those at least I shall return to his daughter. It shall be my—my wedding-present to her." (Curtain.)

* * * * *

Valentine went again to her room when the carriage was at the door. Vivienne was ready—gloved and veiled.

"We will say good-bye here," she said faintly.

"I am going with you to the station," he replied.

She looked unutterable recognition.

At the station Valentine took her ticket, saw to her box, and put her in a compartment alone. Then he stood by the door till the guard blew his whistle, when he put his hand through the window and said, not without agitation, "Good-bye, Vivienne!"

She could not answer audibly, but she seized his hand with both of hers, and pressed her lips to it passionately.

For that one moment in her life she felt remorse, wishing the past undone—a better future possible with the love of this good man.

But it was little more than the remorse of a gambler finding he has backed the wrong colour and lost. It was banished as a stupid weakness before she reached Ipswich, where she provided herself with a dinner-basket, and prepared to enjoy a hearty meal without any of the tiresome restrictions lately imposed.

Valentine's gloom was less readily thrown off; but a stiff walk over the golf links invigorated him. A wholesome breeze swept up from the sea; light sparkled on the horizon, and somehow Valentine felt its influence

creeping into his mind, and brightening the future with hope.

On his return to the Hall he found a telegram awaiting him—a telegram from the Credit Lyonnaise at Monaco, stating that two of the notes paid to Lord Rawton had been traced to the International Banking Company's branch at Nice.

So the poor old uncle had transferred his capital in that way, and clean forgot all about it! thought Valentine. How odd the news should come just after Vivienne's departure! His first impulse was to wire the news to her at his lodgings in Bloomsbury, thinking it would give her a certain relief to know that the lost fortune was found; but second thoughts restrained him. For, ready as he was to accord to women all the virtues under the sun, he saw that it would be scarcely in human nature for a girl to rejoice in another acquiring a fortune from which she was dispossessed.

He lost no time, however, in taking the news to Dr. Sturgess, to put an end to his unjust suspicion.

"And she is gone, you tell me?" said the doctor, after reading the telegram.

"By the 4.15."

"A narrow squeak for her. Well, what do you think of doing about this?"

"I thought of wiring the news to her," Valentine began.

Dr. Sturgess interrupted him violently—

"I forbid you!" he roared.

"May I ask why?" Valentine asked, colouring slightly.

"Because you will undo every tittle of good you've done by this inquiry. The person you have to communicate with is the head of the Criminal Investigation Department in Scotland Yard, and stop payment at the International Banking Company. They have an office certainly in London."

"You are still suspicious?"

"Suspicious! That's not the word for it. I'm convinced. I've been plaguing myself all day to think well of that Miss St. John against my inner consciousness. But, thank Heaven, I can let myself go now that my better judgment is unfettered! When is the next train to town?"

"About eight."

"Well, you have plenty of time. It is too late for her to draw that money to-night; but the police will stop payment before she can touch the money to-morrow."

"Ye-es," said Valentine, dubitatively.

"Parke, get me a decent coat and hat," the doctor cried, and turning brusquely to Valentine, he added, "I see that woman's spell over you is not broken. I'll do it myself."

"I was wondering whether we have any right to

stop payment of that now, even if it is claimed by Miss St. John," Valentine resumed quietly.

"Right! It was your uncle's fortune, and left by will to his daughter. I'm responsible for it, and I'll see that she gets it."

"My uncle left it to Miss St. John, believing her to be his daughter. I doubt if he would have left it to any one else had you told him that she was not."

"Then thank God I didn't tell him!" cried the doctor, stoutly. "And this is the first time I have had occasion to congratulate myself on the trick I played twenty-one years ago."

"Legally, I suppose Midge is entitled to it."

"And morally also. At any rate, if Miss St. John is to profit by my deception, it must be at the discretion of Midge, and not of you nor me, nor Peter, nor Paul."

"That is quite true," said Valentine. "I will go up and take all precautions."

* * * * *

He was still so firmly convinced of Vivienne's innocence that he asked himself, certainly with no other motive than that of purest kindness, whether he should call at his lodgings before returning to Rawton, just to see if the poor girl was all right.

Well, he might have looked in there at midnight with perfect impunity, for Vivienne, after getting her

box of treasure from the cloak-room at Liverpool Street, had driven straight to the Hotel Cecil. Fancy a girl with command of some fifty or sixty thousand pounds putting up for the night at a bachelor's lodgings in Bloomsbury—in his absence!

SCENE VIII

THE LAST OF LADY JUDAS

When Vivienne left the Hotel Cecil next morning she was fit to be seen. That is to say her complexion was of the most exquisite tint (from a fashionable point of view), her lips vivid, her eyes twice the size they had seemed for the past few days, her coiffure admirable, her hat and dress—salmon pink and pale green—a perfect dream. This transformation had cost her three hours—with the aid of a French coiffeur and a professional dresser attached to the hotel—so it was two o'clock when she stepped from the hired brougham into the International Bank in Lombard Street, and presented her cheque for payment.

The clerk took it into an inner office, and the manager himself came forward.

"You will have to endorse this, madam, with your private mark," he said deferentially.

Vivienne took a pen and wrote her name on the back of the cheque, with the letters and figures constituting the countersign.

"How would you like this paid?" he asked, after glancing at the endorsement.

"In notes, chiefly for £10."

"Naturally we haven't that amount in the house. I must ask you to call again."

"When?"

The manager looked at his watch.

"In an hour's time, if that is convenient."

Vivienne expected this delay, being a business-like young woman and not unreasonable, and left saying she would return in an hour.

She drove to Cannon Street and booked a deck cabin for the night passage to Calais and a sleeping compartment in the train from Calais to Paris. Then she walked round St. Paul's Churchyard, looked at the dresses, which were execrable, and took some light refreshment, which was rather worse, at a confectioner's. This whiled away the hour, and she went back to the International Bank.

The money was waiting for her in neat packets of £1000 in each. It was as much as she could pack in her morocco bag with the aid of the clerk. Other customers were at the counter, and it was only natural they should regard her with curiosity. She did not mind that, being accustomed to admiring observation—rather liked it, in fact, as adding to her triumph in at last getting possession of the fortune she had worked so hard for.

A decent young fellow stood at the door of her

brougham, and as she came out he put his hand on the handle of the door as if to open it for her. But he did not open it immediately.

"I must trouble you to come with me to the Mansion House," he said in a low tone.

"To the Mansion House! What for?"

"For being in possession of property belonging to the late Lord Rawton."

She glanced to the right and left instinctively for any way of escape. Another decent young fellow who had stood near her as she packed away her notes was now close to her right hand.

"I suppose I may go in my brougham?" she said, reconciling herself to the inevitable.

The young fellow acquiesced, and stepped into the brougham after her, followed by the other who had watched her in the bank.

The court was sitting at the Mansion House, and the magistrate, at a whispered word or two from his clerk, took the case at once. *Place aux dames.*

Sergeant Atkins, of the detective police force, stated the case briefly. The magistrate asked the usual questions, and then remanded the case for hearing when further evidence should be forthcoming.

Bail offered by indignant prisoner emphatically refused by worthy magistrate. Next case!

* * * * *

While Vivienne was still under remand she was summoned to attend an inquest upon the body of her father. With his last breath Dudley St. John had spoken.

She travelled down to Cromeby in the custody of two policemen. As the train entered the station half a dozen people on the look-out for her ran along by the carriage and gathered round the door when it stopped. A couple of men with hand cameras took snapshots as she passed to the fly. It was then evident to her that the coming inquiry involved something more than the mere identification of her father's body.

She was lodged in the police-station at Cromeby for the night, and taken on to Rawton the following morning. The inquest was to be held in the club-room of the Black Boys. A crowd of villagers stood in front of the inn. Their awe as she stepped from the fly was ominous. She was led at once to the long room where the court had already assembled. She heard a confusion of voices within as she approached; it ceased instantly as the constable opened the door, and she entered the room in silence, unbroken by a whisper.

A tiger brought to bay, she looked round her with calm defiance, knowing she had no friend to pity or help her, no mercy to expect. She recognized the coroner, a scowl on his face now instead of his previous smirk, savage in having been so easily misled—his clerk, two

or three of the jurors—all with the same set look upon their faces, as though they were looking upon a Medusa. And then at the other end of the long table she saw Dr. Sturgess, brows down, under-lip up, a box before him on the table, and Valentine looking grave and careworn, but less unmerciful than any. She looked long at him in whom was her last hope, not daring to risk rebuff by any sign of recognition, yet craving that sign from him. But there was no movement of the head, no relaxation of his features; he, too, was looking at the Gorgon's Head.

She asked herself what had happened, though the explanation was evident enough to her guilty conscience. The fact was this: Dr. Sturgess had demanded an inquiry into the cause of St. John's death, and at the preliminary meeting had made a statement which, verified, would stamp his daughter as a monster of iniquity, and for this verification Fleet Street, hungering for copy, had sent down reporters and artists, and all the little world of East Anglia was waiting in eager expectancy.

She wore the dress in which she had been taken to the Mansion House, and this alone condemned her in the sight of those who had last seen her in simple black and mourning for the loss of her benefactor; the expression of self-abandonment and utter dejection in her face was equally damning.

She was wretched—more wretched than she had ever before felt in the course of her life. Everything

about her offended her senses—the nauseous smell that came from the tap-room below, the hideous bare room, the repulsive faces of the men about her, gloating over her fall, the harsh sound of a wooden chair being pushed forward upon the sanded floor for her accommodation—all jarred upon her overstrung nerves. She was conscious of being ugly, of the frightful contrast between her face, unpainted for a week, and her smart dress. Starvation alone had made her touch the loathsome prison fare, and that, together with the deprivation of those luxuries and comforts which had become the necessities of her life, made her miserably ill. She sat down and closed her eyes in utter weariness of body and mind.

The coroner opened the proceedings. She tried to shut her ears to his droning voice, to the grating of feet on the sanded floor, as the jury went out to view the body and returned. Why had she been dragged down to this tedious farce?—a mere repetition of what had gone before at the inquest of Rawton, minus the excitement for her of playing an active part in it. When it was all over she would be dragged back to that horrible prison cell, to wait there till they had raked up sufficient evidence to convict her of felony. For that was what it would probably end in. The legal adviser, with whom she had held consultations in Mount Pleasant, had put the probable issue plainly before her. That weighed much more on her spirits than the upshot of this silly inquest. Her mind

wandered between the present examination and her interview with the lawyer the day before yesterday in an irregular manner as the subject under discussion interested her or not.

Dr. Sturgess was under examination now; coroner speaking—

"What reason have you for concluding that the deceased escaped from the burning mill by the gallery outside the first-floor, and not from the ground floor, in which you believe the fire originated?"

"The position in which Parke found him, and a dislocated shoulder point to the fall."

"Was there any other indication?"

"Yes; the lock of the dispensary door was found amongst the charred rubbish with the bolt shot and the key close by."

Oh! they had found that out, had they?

"What does that indicate, in your judgment?"

"That this key had been taken from the inside and turned upon the outside."

"Why?"

"Because the deceased, finding the place in flames, would attempt to escape by the door rather than through the fire by the hatchway in the floor above."

"You think, then, that at the moment the fire was started some one closed the door and locked the deceased in the dispensary?"

"I am morally certain that is what happened."

"This is not the first time, I believe, that you have been led to suspect a crime by the discovery of a key?"

"No; but on the former occasion the key was of a kind that can only be used on the outside of a door."

The doctor then had seen the mistake she made with that Bramah key—a mistake which she had perceived only when the key was thrust too far under the door to be drawn back again.

* * * * *

"You will be sent to trial," the lawyer had said, "not for larceny, but for embezzlement. That is—felony, punishable with imprisonment for fourteen years, if the case is a very bad one. Now, if the prosecution can prove that you knew perfectly well where the stolen money was at the very time that Lord Rawton to your knowledge, sworn to at the inquest, meditated suicide in consequence of the loss of that money, your case *will* be a very bad one, and you may expect no mitigation of the extreme penalty."

* * * * *

"A few hours before his death, you say," the coroner was saying, "the deceased recovered his speech?"

* * * * *

Fourteen years in a prison like the villainous den

she had lived in for the past week! Fourteen years! why, she would be thirty-five when she came out. And what would she be like? Would her face become coarse, her voice raucous, like that of street women?

"I should hardly suppose," the lawyer said, "that the Rawton family would claim any lien upon the jewels given you by the late Lord Rawton, although the fact that they were given under the belief that you were his daughter might very well form grounds for action. But, of course, you will never touch a single penny of the impounded property."

* * * * *

"Did he admit having actually set fire to the building?" asked the coroner.

* * * * *

Well, supposing the jewels were given to her when she came out of prison, what provision would they make for her future? Say she could get half their value from a dealer, that would be five or six thousand pounds, which might be made to yield interest of two hundred a year. Two hundred! why, she had got through more than that in a month! What woman could live on two hundred a year? And at thirty-five, with looks and charms all gone, what chance was there of supplementing that miserable pittance? None.

* * * * *

"He accused his daughter, you say, of poisoning Lord Rawton and employing him to destroy you and the present Lord Rawton?"

"Yes."

Vivienne now lent her ear, the evidence becoming interesting.

"You and Lord Rawton being dead, there would have been no one living to dispute her claim to profit by the will of the late Lord Rawton made in favour of his daughter?"

"That is the case."

"Was anybody present when the deceased made this confession?"

"No one."

"Have you any witness to the fact that he did make this confession?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Here," said the doctor, laying his hand on the box that stood on the table before him. "You yourselves shall hear his very words."

The box contained that instrument Valentine had found him completing on the night of his visit to the mill—a combination of microphone and phonograph.

He touched a spring. There was a whirring of wheels, and then the voice of Dudley St. John spoke, hoarse and harsh, but distinct and clear as the living voice—with gulps between each word

or two, and a voice-rattle like the crackling of parchment.

"'Lady Judas'—'Lady Judas!'—my daughter—" croaked the voice from the box. "She did it—she poisoned the old man—with her own hand. She put me on—by lying promises—to kill you and the other—she was with me—when I—turned the water—on the carbide—she—that thing I call Judas——"

Vivienne had thrust her hand in her bosom as if to still its beating. She rose now to her feet and cried—

"Put up your plaything, and end this farce. Do you think sane men will convict me of murder and parricide upon the ravings of a dying murderer—on a confession extorted from him by that vain brute, through God knows what surgical torture? Listen to me, if you want the truth!"

Dr. Sturgess had pressed a button, and stopped the instrument.

"I must warn you," said the coroner's clerk, "that any statement you make may be taken in evidence against you."

"Then take this down," said Vivienne; "and make what use you please of the evidence. My purpose is to save myself from the lot of a felon. Have you written that? Now add this: I murdered Lord Rawton with the aid of my father. He brought me fifty grains of the deadliest

poison known. One grain is more than enough to kill a man. I gave Lord Rawton more than that, yet kept enough to kill a hundred others." She paused.

"You would like to know how it killed him. Well, you shall. It killed him—" she flung her hand up to her open mouth and cried: "Thus!" as the empty bottle fell from her hand.

Her teeth snapped together as she spoke; she stood motionless for a moment, and then fell forward, dead!

SCENE IX

THE CURTAIN FALLS

(Copy of a letter from a packet highly scented with tobacco.)

"Bellagio,
"Lago di Como,
"September 15 (I think).

"My dear Cousin Valentine,

"You tell me to write all about myself, and never mind about anybody else. Well, we left Interlaaken on Friday, and here we are at Bellagio. You see I must say we, for I am still part of dear old Granny, and she is now inseparable from Mrs. Frobisher. Did I tell you about this lady? We picked each other up at Vevey. She is about the same age as Granny, a widow, and just as volatile. A girl at the hotel described her in three words, as a 'Frisky old bounder,' and I don't think I could describe her better in three pages. She and Granny at once swore eternal friendship, although, like the Disagreeable Man, 'I can't tell why!' For their likings are diametrically opposed in some things. Granny, as you know, is decidedly Continental in her tastes, whilst Mrs. Frobisher is essentially English.

If Granny raves about the wonderful scenery of Bellagio (and indeed it is most lovely), Mrs. Frobisher at once expatiates on the beauty of Bournemouth, and when Granny extols the cooking and service at this hotel, Mrs. Frobisher caps it with the homeliness and comforts of a boarding-house at Ventnor. Granny goes into raptures over the vineyards, and Mrs. Frobisher makes disparaging comparisons between the shops here and those at Hastings. But in one thing they are perfectly agreed, that in all places and seasons there is nothing more delightful than to talk from morning till night about the people you know and the people you don't want to know. For my own part I feel a little like a third wheel in a gig. I don't care greatly for talking about acquaintances (though there are just one or two friends that I never tire of discussing), and I take part with neither Montagues nor Capulets in disputing the superior merits of hotels and boarding-houses, so I say very little and think a great deal. I am sure Mrs. Frobisher would love me for ever if she only knew what I do think sometimes. Last night half a dozen men, dressed in striped shirts and red caps to represent Neapolitans (and looking as unlike them as the man in the moon), came in a boat lit up with lanterns and sang under the hotel terrace the everlasting 'Santa Lucia' and 'Funicula.' They sang badly, and at the end lit two very small blue lights. 'How poetical—so Italian!' exclaimed Granny. 'They do these things better at Earl's Court,' thought I. Now

if Mrs. Frobisher had known this, she would have transferred her affection to me from Granny at once. And I didn't want that. I want dear old Granny to be just as happy as she can be, and never tire of her friend. And so I tell no one (but you) how I love England, and how I yearn sometimes to change this warm perfumed air for a brisk, vigorous breeze, and the salt smell of the sea.

"Granny talks of leaving here early in October. That will be none too soon for Mrs. Frobisher. Granny thinks Amalfi will be so nice in November. Mrs. Frobisher plumps for Eastbourne in the winter, and coal fires in your bedroom as soon as the days get short. So I hardly know what will become of us; for Granny's will is strong, and so is Mrs. Frobisher's; but I think of the two the latter has the more masterful chin.

"Second dinner bell and my hair to do! Only just time to say good-bye, dear cousin.

"MIDGE."

* * * * *

(Copy of letter from a packet scented with violets.)

"Shipton Manor,
"Sept. 18.

"MY DEAR COUSIN MIDGE,

"Long live Mrs. Frobisher! May she rule dear Granny as Britannia shall rule the waves that bring you all back again to England. Tell her that I look forward confidently to seven hundred and twenty hours of uninterrupted sunshine in the month you

return. It must be gloomy enough for me until then. It would be easy to draw up a kind of meteorological report for the past three months from the addresses of your letters. Here's the first: 'Paris, July 2.'—I know that day was miserable. 'Vevey, July 25.'—Dull. 'Lucerne, August 5.'—Wretched. 'Brunen, August 20.'—Horrid. 'Interlaaken, September 1.'—Worse than ever. The descending scale can go no farther than Amalfi, which can only be indicated by violent squalls and tempests. Do take sides with Mrs. Frobisher, if it is necessary to prevent further wandering.

"You will see by the above heading that I have taken up my quarters here. I have turned the work-people out and made the place habitable. I have got heaps of furniture and pretty things in the house, and they remain in heaps. I have abandoned all hope of arranging them daintily. One room is snug—my morning-room—and there I live and eat and work in company with my dog, but all the other rooms are waiting for a fairy hand to put them into shape. Dr. Sturgess has come over several times to help me, but he doesn't know the difference between a curtain and a blind; nor do I. So there they are, curtains and blinds piled up on tables instead of hanging at the windows. 'I tell you what it is,' said he, yesterday, scratching the back of his neck, 'we must have a woman in to help us, if the job is ever to be finished.'"

* * * * *

The wanderers came back to Cromeby, and there

met Valentine. And when the two old ladies were bundled into their fly and the luggage seen to, Lord Rawton led Lady Midge to the machines.

It was about lighting-up time when they started; it was quite dark when they reached the cross roads; stars were twinkling through the bare boughs of the arching beeches. They got down to light their lamps.

Then all of a sudden Valentine caught her hand in his and said, "Midge, dearest, I must know my fate now!"

"Oh, may I make it a happy one, dear!" she answered, holding up her lips to his—there were no trippers about now.

* * * * *

One evening after dinner—they were married now, and quite settled in their home at Shipton Manor—Midge perched herself on her husband's knee as he sat in the big chair before the glowing log fire, and nestling into the hollow of his shoulder, said—

"Val, love, I want to know what I am to do with my money; not the dot Granny gave me, but the other which came from my father? Do you want it?"

"Not a penny of it. With my own private means and the money that comes from the farms, and the interest on Granny's dot, we muster nearly a thousand a year—that's enough, in all conscience, for our reasonable wants. What should you like to do with the money—the fifty thousand?"

"Give it away," she answered, without hesitation.

"Oh, I'm not mistaken in you, darling!" he murmured, kissing the shining head tenderly; "and whom shall you give it to?"

"Little children."

THE END

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